Summary

I know I said there would be no "book 3" in this series, and I meant it. Until I started getting ideas that wouldn't leave me alone, and then suddenly I was plotting out another multi-chapter story!

It's a work in progress, so if you'd rather wait until it's finished to start reading, that's understandable. I have about 15 chapters written so far and 40 chapters plotted out (but my characters have been known to mess with my plans, they already have and I'm only 15 chapters in). I have no idea how long it'll be or when it will be finished. My plan is to post one chapter a week (and hopefully write at least one a week, too).

This part of the story is set 2 years after the end of FUBAR. I have written 4 one-shots that take place between the two stories: Hanson Family Values, Ditto, Home, and Shake It Off. There are a few things that will be happening in the early chapters of SNAFUBAR that will make more sense if you have read those one-shots, but it's not a huge deal if you don't. You might be a little lost for a while, that's all. ;)}
Hollywood Hills, California - May 18th, 2015

- I'm in love with my life.

It's a serious, overwhelming, all consuming, wouldn't-change-a-thing kind of love. Even on the most tiring and stressful days, I go to bed feeling thankful. And rarely does a day pass that I don't wake up and spend at least a moment or two struggling to accept that, no, this isn't all a dream. It's all real, and it's all mine.

Those are my amazing kids, and this is my incredible house, and my adorable (yet slightly demented) dog, and my successful career doing exactly what I've always wanted to be doing.

And that breathtakingly beautiful guy in my bed isn't a figment of my imagination. He's my husband. My soul mate, my much better half (regardless of what he might say).

I swear, sometimes I get out of bed in the morning with the strongest urge to push both of the French doors to our bedroom's balcony open wide, throw my arms out and yell, "I'm the King of the world!" at the top of my lungs for all of the Hollywood Hills to hear. Because that's how it feels, like I'm the luckiest guy on the entire planet. Instead, I usually open the doors quietly so that I won't disturb Tommy, and then I'll stand on the balcony and stare out at the warm glow cast across the city by the rising sun. And I spend those few moments of silence before the rest of my little world wakes up letting it all sink in. Letting myself truly appreciate how far I've traveled to find this place, how hard I've fought for it, and the fact that I can stop now. I don't need to search anymore. I've won every battle that I've had to fight.

I'm the King of the fucking world!

"You're doing it again."

There's nothing I can do to keep the faint blush from spreading across my cheeks as I turn to look at Tommy. And I can tell from the smirk on his lips that he can see it, even from all the way over on the
"I'm not doing anything." I reply as casually as I can, making my way back into the bedroom. "I was just looking to see what the weather was gonna be like this morning."

"There's an app for that." He informs me as I disappear into the adjoining bathroom, and only once I'm completely out of sight do I allow myself to smile.

Grin.

It's not that I don't want him to see how happy I am; he knows how happy I am. I just know that I look like a total dork right now, and there's no way he'll be able to resist giving me crap for it. I'm not gonna give him that satisfaction. At least, not right away.

I'm kind of a tease like that, I guess.

I won't lie, part of me is hoping he'll hop into the shower with me at some point. And even though I'm hoping for it, waiting for it, I'm sure I'll still scream like a little girl if he actually does it. But much to my disappointment, he never puts in an appearance. Which probably means he either fell back asleep or he was jumped on by an impatient child demanding to be fed. It happens a lot in this house.

After drying off my hair and securing the towel around my waist, I return to the bedroom to find him right where I left him. He's alone and wide awake, which automatically makes me want to pout. It means he chose to stay out here instead of joining me in the bathroom. Because he's an even bigger tease than I am!

I can feel him watching me as I turn my back to him and open the dresser drawer. Instead of letting my towel fall to the ground before pulling my underwear on, I put my underwear on under my towel so he gets to see precisely nothing. Only then do I throw my towel aside and chance a look over my shoulder. And, of course, he's pouting.

"You're doing it again." I taunt him playfully, rummaging around for a t-shirt.

"Fuck you."

"If you'd gotten your ass out of bed and taken a shower with me, you could have. But now it's too late." I sigh as I shake my head at him sadly, earning myself a scowl in response. "Maybe tomorrow."

"You don't even have any clothes on yet!" He argues in the whiniest tone he possibly can. "Why're you being a dick about it?"

"You started it."

"Fine, I started it. Why don't you come over here and finish it?"

"Tempting..." I muse, pretending to mull it over as I take a slow step closer to the bed. "But now's really not a good time for me. I just got clean..."

He rolls his eyes, throwing the covers off and scooting closer to the edge of the bed. "If we fuck in the shower we can get off and rinse off at the same time. Problem solved!"

"You couldn't have thought of that ten minutes ago when I was actually in the shower?" I tease as he grabs me by the wrist and I allow him to lead me back into the bathroom. "You know, I feel like I
should stand my ground here. I don't wanna reward you for bad behavior."

"So don't." He smiles at me devilishly, turning around as soon as we reach the shower and immediately pushing my underwear down. "Punish me."

"I don't think it counts as punishment if you ask-"

The rest of my reasoning is cut short by an incredibly demanding kiss. Usually I don't like to be interrupted when I'm trying to make a point, but I'm willing to let it slide this time. He wraps his arms around me, kissing me eagerly as I kick my underwear aside and he pulls me into the shower with him. I'm prepared for the water to be cold for a second or two when he first turns it on, but being prepared for it doesn't keep me from gasping as soon as the first surge of water hits my skin. Somehow it only heightens what I was already feeling, making me hyper-sensitive to every little touch of his skin against mine. It's difficult to hold on to any coherent thoughts right now, but there's one that's unshakeable. Just like the thoughts of thankfulness and gratitude I experience when I wake up beside him every morning and fall asleep with him each night.

It's awe, plain and simple.

We've been living together for just over two and a half years, and married for a year. I guess, to some people, this could still be considered the "honeymoon phase". In my mind, we're long past that point. And yet we still have these moments where we're all over each other the way we were any time we saw each other when we first got together. I don't want him any less now than I did the night I met him. If anything, I want him more. Being with him is never predictable, and certainly never boring. The fact that we know each other so well in every sense imaginable, and that we've had sex in pretty much every position we possibly can without risking serious injury isn't in any way a negative. It doesn't mean that there's nothing left to learn or experience, or that our sex life is in any way repetitive.

And that's what still astonishes me about our relationship. Somehow things still feel new between us, like we haven't had morning sex in this shower more times than I could ever try to tally!

Maybe it's because there's never a guarantee that we'll even get to start, let alone finish. We got lucky this morning (no pun intended). I woke up early, which gave us a little extra alone time before the kids woke up. And since they tend to stay up a little later on Sunday nights than they do on other school nights, they always sleep later on Monday mornings. Most days don't start out quite this peacefully. Once one of them wakes up, they start making enough noise to wake everyone else in the house up.

Then, unless it's a weekend, we begin our daily routine.

I'll make breakfast while Tommy wrangles the kids into the dining room. We'll eat together, and then I'll clean up and pack their lunches while he chases them around getting them ready for school. I usually take Ezra, Penny, River and Viggo to school, since Tommy loathes driving the minivan in the Hollywood Hills, and he takes Asta over to her pre-school.

We enrolled her just after she turned two so that she could socialize with other kids her age. It was nothing new for me; I'd gone through the same thing with four other kids over the years. But it was quite possibly more distressing for Tommy than it was for Asta. In fact, when we took her in for her first day, she threw enough of a fit that he couldn't bring himself to 'abandon' her and he insisted on taking her home. I had to force him to leave her in the very capable hands of her fully trained teachers the next day, and he was miserable until we went to pick her up later that afternoon. But as it turned out, while he was at home worrying about how traumatized she might be, she had apparently started having the time of her life the moment the door had closed behind us that morning.
It took a week or so for him to finally feel comfortable leaving her there, whether she was crying or not, and now it's entirely painless for both of them. I'm pretty sure his favorite time of day is still afternoon pick up, though. I can never tell which of them lights up more as soon as she spots him walking towards the playground.

The hours that the kids are in school aren't exactly downtime for the two of us. There's always something to do, especially now that Jenna has a day job as a teacher's assistant, and a serious boyfriend. She's basically only around for the post-school rush and any "date nights" we can book her for.

We usually go with the divide and conquer tactic when it comes to chores and errands. One of us will go grocery shopping while the other does laundry, or one of us will clean the kitchen while the other cleans the bathroom. That way, on a good day, we're done just in time to have lunch together, and then we have a couple of hours to spend doing whatever we want. Most of the time we end up in the studio, especially lately. But sometimes we'll get together with friends, or go for a run, or take Duke on a hike. And every once in a while we'll simply lounge around on the couch and appreciate the complete and utter calm.

After the kids get home from school, Jenna helps them with their homework and Tommy keeps Asta occupied while I make a start on dinner. The rest of our evening is typically spent doing whatever the kids want to do until bedtime. Unless it's one of the evenings we've roped Jenna into staying late. In which case Tommy and I will wait until Asta goes to bed and then head out to see a movie, or go to a club and see a band play, or meet up with friends at a bar.

On several occasions, we've used our "nights off" to host mini jam sessions with some of our closest musician friends. It's kinda like Fool's Banquet, with artists from every genre crammed into a studio for hours on end, surviving on nothing but music and beer. I'd say at least half of the songs on the new Phases album began to take shape in our studio, not to mention the choruses of a couple of songs that have since gotten some major radio airplay. Alex often jokes that we should put out an album of all of the random (sometimes drunken) recordings we have and call it "The Wine Cellar Sessions". I'm not entirely opposed to the idea, but I'm not sure everyone else who participated would be on board.

Tonight is a little different for us. We're meeting up with Holden and his husband at one of those hip-for-five-minutes nightclubs in WeHo. We're not really all that into the club scene, and neither are they most of the time. But Holden assured me that it wouldn't become a habit, and that they had a good reason for wanting to meet here instead of at one of our regular hangouts, so...

"I think they're having some kind of joint midlife crisis." Tommy mutters to me as we approach the club, the bass from the music playing inside vibrating down the sidewalk.

"Holden said it's a one-time thing."

"Why does it have to be a thing at all?"

I can't help but chuckle softly as he petulantly kicks a stone into the street. "I don't know. He said we'd find out when we get here."

"Fine. But if I end up getting mauled by half naked body builders, I expect you to jump in and defend my honor."

"If that happens... I'll think about it."

He shoves me playfully, causing me to stumble and almost fall face first into the chest of the bouncer.
at the door of the club. The guy eyes us suspiciously, like he thinks we might already be trashed. Luckily he decides we're sober enough to let us in, and I quickly text Holden to let him know that we're here. As we venture further into the club, I instinctively reach out for Tommy's hand and find that he's already reaching for mine. It's funny, but for two guys who have made a living performing for thousands of people, neither or us does very well with crowds. Besides, the last thing I need is to get separated from him within the first five minutes!

Holden texts me back to let me know that he and Ryan have procured a table for us in the balcony section, which is a relief because it means we won't be stuck down here with a bunch of sweaty strangers doing whatever it is that passes for "dancing" this month. Don't get me wrong, I'm all for rubbing up against Tommy like he's a scratching post and I have an itch that won't quit, but I don't call it "dancing" and I (usually) don't do it in public.

As soon as Holden spots us approaching, he jumps up from the table to greet us. We don't get the chance to see each other nearly as much as I know we'd all like to. His work schedule is so crazy, and our home life isn't always as organized as I like to tell myself it is, so finding a time that makes sense for all of us is tricky. But whenever we do get together it feels so easy, like we see each other all the time. I don't know if it was the circumstances we met him under, or the things he saw us go through, but there's definitely a connection there that I don't tend to have with people who I see as infrequently as I see him. It's like we skipped several years of friendship in those two long weeks I was in the hospital, and now it feels as though we've known each other our whole lives.

I'm not quite as close with his husband, Ryan, but I definitely don't dislike him. Sometimes he still surprises me with how blunt and shameless he can be about certain things, but it's something I admire about him rather than finding it off-putting. He doesn't need to know someone well before feeling comfortable enough to tell them exactly what he thinks on any given topic, whereas I only feel secure enough to share my true feelings with people I trust.

"Perfect timing!" Holden tells us, letting go of me and hugging Tommy. "We just ordered a round of drinks."

"Keep 'em coming." Orders Tommy semi-seriously. "I've got a feeling drunk is the thing to be in here."

"Loosen up, Thomas." Ryan nudges him good-naturedly before we make ourselves comfortable in the booth they've picked out. "If I didn't know better, I'd swear you were straight."

"Who says I'm not?"

"The guy you're married to, maybe?"

"The guy I'm married to was married to a chick for ten years before he married me." Tommy shrugs unconcernedly. "Didn't make him straight."

I have to fight to keep my smile under control, but when Holden and I chance a look at each other it becomes almost impossible. It looks like it's gonna be one of those nights.

"Whatever." Declares Ryan with a wave of his hand when no better argument presents itself. "Gay, straight or otherwise, deep down some part of you is dying to get out there and dance like the diva we all know you are."

"Pretty sure the only dancing queen at this table is you, dude." He retorts.

"Do you even remember how this conversation started?" I ask Holden just as the waitress arrives
with a tray of shot glasses.
"Not a clue."
"It was because-
Holden quickly reaches out and covers Ryan's mouth with his hand, knowing that if he doesn't kill this topic now we could be debating Tommy's sexuality all night. "Honey, sometimes people ask questions they don't actually want answered."
"Then they shouldn't ask them." Ryan replies simply, like that's all there is to it. And honestly... he's probably right. "Cheers!"

Tommy and I throw our shots back gladly, not asking or caring exactly what kind of liquor is passing our lips as we do so. It really doesn't matter; they pretty much all have the same effect. I feel Tommy lean against me as he sets his empty shot glass on the table in front of us, and I automatically slip my arm around him and hold him closer. Holden and Ryan are busy having a shameless wrapped-up-in-each-other moment, and the brief break in the conversation gives me the chance to properly take in our surroundings.

This is another one of those things that I can't quite believe is part of my reality. Even though we rarely attend nightclubs like this one, there was a time in my life where it would have been completely out of the question for me to even consider it. I couldn't be seen in a club full of gay men and go-go dancers, I couldn't just hang out in public with an openly gay couple, and I definitely couldn't be seen getting cozy with another guy. The world saw me a certain way, and I had a responsibility to everyone in my life to live up to that view.

I don't anymore.

And even though it's been a few years since Tommy and I were outed on Perez Hilton's blog, being "out and proud" is still taking some getting used to. Some days I won't even think about it, especially when we're just doing normal things like taking the kids to the beach or going out to dinner. But when I find myself in an unfamiliar setting such as this one, it really hits me how completely different my life is now.

It's freeing.

"Wanna dance?" I whisper (loudly) against Tommy's ear, causing him to pull back immediately so that he can give me a distinct 'what the fuck?' look.

"I'm gonna need a hell of a lot more alcohol in me before that's even a remote possibility."

Challenge accepted! "That's doable."

"I don't dance."

"Sure you do." I tease him, leaning in until my lips are close enough to lightly graze his as I speak. "I've seen you shake it."

"Not in public." He continues to protest, warily eyeing the gyrating crowd on the dance floor below.

"I'll dance with you." Ryan offers me with a self-satisfied grin, leaving both Tommy and Holden scowling at him and chorusing an emphatic "no".

"Ask me again when I'm drunk." Tommy concedes grudgingly. "Really fucking drunk."
Scooting out from his side of the booth, Ryan stands and reaches his hand out to Holden. "It's more fun when you're sober."

"Oh boy." Sighs Holden, taking his husband's outstretched hand and allowing himself to be pulled out of his seat. "If I'm not back in five minutes, send help!"

"Will do!"

"Hey, wait!" Tommy calls out to them before they're too far away to hear him over the obnoxiously loud bass. "When're you gonna tell us why the hell we're here?"

Holden opens his mouth to respond, but Ryan steps forward and answers before he has a chance to. "Come dance with us and we'll tell you right now."

"No thanks." Snorts Tommy indignantly. "I'd rather let the suspense kill me first."

Without any further attempts to coax Tommy onto the dance floor, Ryan and Holden disappear in the direction of the stairs, leaving the two of us alone in a nice big booth. I'm not really one for public displays of affection. I'll hold his hand without a second thought, and kiss him whenever the mood strikes me, but we've never been one of those couples who feels the need to grope each other in full view of everyone.

This is different, though.

"If you won't dance with me, will you at least give me a lap dance?" I request playfully, my smile growing even wider when he turns to look at me with an excited gleam in his eyes. "I was kidding... mostly."

"I'd totally do it."

"I know you would." I laugh as he shifts in his seat until he's half kneeling on it, giving me his full attention. "How about we just make out until they come back?"

He doesn't need to be asked twice, his mouth is on mine almost before I've finished speaking. My whole body is instantaneously engulfed by the most addictive rush of excitement as he presses himself against me, deepening the kiss and threading his fingers into my hair. My hands trail along his sides, grasping at the fabric of his t-shirt for a moment before drifting down to his hip bones. He groans into my mouth as I tug him closer, and the next thing I know his leg is draped over my lap and he's practically straddling me. I have a flash of déjà vu, thinking back to our very first kiss and how quickly it started to spiral out of control. Part of me always wondered what might have happened between us that night if I hadn't been interrupted by a barrage of texts.

I'd be lying if I said that the possibilities of that moment haven't been the subject of several fantasies over the years...

His hips rock slowly against me, and I gasp as my hands caress his thighs and silently urge him to do it again. I'm seriously on the verge of asking him if he wants to go somewhere a little more private, because the way he's making me feel is driving me so crazy that if I don't suggest we relocate now, I might not be thinking rationally enough to do it before this gets out of hand.

But before I can force myself to break the kiss, he does it for me. I'm expecting him to ask me the same question I was about to ask him, but he doesn't. He doesn't say anything, he doesn't even look at me as he slips off of my lap and onto the seat beside me.

"You okay?" I ask breathlessly, straightening myself up a little as he starts to move towards the edge
"I'm fine." He assures me, flashing me the least convincing smile imaginable as he gets out of his seat. "I just need to take a leak."

If he had said those words to me a few seconds ago, I would have taken it as code for "let's go find a bathroom stall barely big enough for two". It's obvious that's not what he's suggesting, though. I wrack my brain trying to figure out what could have caused such a notable shift in his mood. I try to remember exactly how I was touching him and kissing him, wondering if I somehow did something to completely turn him off. But as I sit alone in the booth, replaying the past five minutes in my mind, the music pumping through the club starts to permeate my thoughts. It takes me a little while to figure out what it is that's so familiar about it. The song isn't one I've heard more than a couple of times before, but that voice is one that I definitely recognize.

It's Adam.
Just after the song ends, Ryan and Holden return to the booth. But there's still no sign of Tommy. All I want to do right now is go and find him, but if he'd wanted to talk it out he wouldn't have left in the first place. I don't want to make things worse by harassing him, so I tell myself that he'll come back when he's ready and the best thing I can do for him is wait here until he does.

"Where's Tommy?" Holden frowns as he drops down into the booth beside me and Ryan flags down one of the waitresses nearby to order another round.

"Bathroom." I tell him with a small smile, turning my attention to the dancers downstairs so that I won't have to look him in the eyes and act like everything's fine.

I used to be such a convincing liar, I had to be. But it's been so long since I've needed to deceive anyone on a regular basis, I think I'm out of practice. Usually I'd view that as a positive thing, but in moments like this I wish I was better at disguising my dishonesty.

"Everything okay?"

"Yeah." When I chance a look at Holden, he's got me fixed with a very skeptical eyebrow raise. "It's nothing."

"What's nothing?" Asks Ryan, glancing back and forth between the two of us curiously. "What did we miss?"

"Just... the song that was just playing while you guys were dancing was Adam Lambert's new song." Holden's worried expression instantly morphs into one of understanding. "I can see why that'd bum him out."

"Why? Adam Lambert's hot." Ryan shrugs, completely oblivious to the entire situation. "I wouldn't say no."

"Excuse me?" Chuckles Holden. "I'm sitting right here."
"But he's on my list!"

"Your list?" I question in amusement as Holden rolls his eyes and shakes his head dismissively. "Please tell me it's not one of those 'Celebrities I'm Allowed To Have Sex With' lists."

"Uh, yah it is." He replies with a distinct 'duh' tone. "Are you telling me you don't have a list?"

"I don't. Sorry to disappoint."

"I guess that makes sense. I mean, you are a celebrity, so the odds of you having the opportunity to sleep with someone on your list are way higher than they are for the rest of us."

"Uh..."

Ryan gasps suddenly, reaching across Holden to grab my arm in excitement. "You should have a list of like... regular people you're allowed to have sex with!"

"My husband, ladies and gentlemen." Remarks Holden in mock pride.

"Can I be on the list?"

"Dude! I'm sitting right here!"

"I'm actually completely happy not having a list, but I appreciate the interest... I think." I laugh softly, grateful for the interruption provided by the waitress returning with our drinks. And as if on cue, Tommy reappears just as the last shot glass is placed on the table. "Hey! Good thing you came back when you did, I was about to drink your shot as well as mine."

"Not cool." He scowls at me, sidling back into the booth like nothing ever happened. But the way he immediately grabs his shot and throws it back before the rest of us even have a chance to reach for ours is pretty telling, at least to someone who knows him as well as I do. What I also know is that pointing that fact out, or bringing up the Adam incident in any way is only going to tick him off. And if I don't change the subject before Ryan is done swallowing his shot, there's a damn good chance that his lack of filter will result in him flat out asking Tommy about Adam.

"So, now that you've had a chance to dance, do we get to know why we're here?" I ask hopefully, noting the grins that spread across both of their faces the second they look at each other. "What's going on with you guys? You're already married, so we know you're not about to announce that you're engaged or anything."

Holden shrugs, setting his shot glass down on the table. "We just wanted to have one last crazy night on the town with our good friends."

Tommy frowns in confusion. "You look way too fucking happy for one of you to be dying, so... why's it the last night?"

"Because I think it'd be inappropriate for us to be out drinking and partying once we're pregnant." Explains Ryan with a completely straight face, which leaves Tommy and I looking at him like he's lost his mind.

"Okay, and the real reason is...?"

"That is the real reason."

"I hate to break it to ya, man, but neither of you can get pregnant." Tommy informs him with feigned
sympathy.

"We can't, but our surrogate can." Holden smirks. "At least, I sure as hell hope she can."

"And I figure the least I can do is give up alcohol and caffeine in solidarity." Adds Ryan.

"I, on the other hand, will not be giving up caffeine because it is vital to my existence."

I cannot for the life of me decide how I'm supposed to respond to this news. Do I take them seriously? I mean... they seem serious, but this sounds insane!

Not that them having a baby is insane, but this is the first time they've ever mentioned it. It's completely out of nowhere, which makes me think it has to be a joke. But something about the look on Holden's face right now is enough to convince me that this isn't a prank and they aren't going to laugh in our faces as soon as we offer them our heartfelt congratulations.

"You're seriously having a baby?" I finally manage to ask.

Holden nods immediately, his smile widening. "We didn't wanna say anything until we knew for sure it was happening. We weren't even going to tell anyone until our surrogate was out of the first trimester, but we were too excited to wait."

"That's amazing!" I tell them sincerely, standing up to give each of them a tight hug. "Congratulations!"

"Thanks!" Beams Ryan as he returns my embrace before accepting one from Tommy. "We've been dying to tell someone besides our parents for weeks!"

"It's been so crazy, you know? All the tests and paperwork and then choosing an egg donor and a surrogate, and waiting until we could actually do the IVF treatment..." Sighs Holden, shaking his head at the thought of it all. "It felt like we were never gonna get to this point."

"What point are you at?" I ask, completely wrapped up in their excitement and wanting to hear all about this secret they've been keeping from everyone. "You said your surrogate isn't pregnant yet, right?"

"They're doing the embryo transfer tomorrow morning, so..." Ryan crosses his fingers on both hands as Holden smiles and wraps an arm around him. "The doctor said we should know within a couple of weeks if it worked."

"Wow..."

"It's gonna work." Holden assures him confidently. "I've got a good feeling."

"Me, too." Grins Ryan. "I hope it's twins!"

"I think one would be plenty for now, sweetie."

"But if we have twins, we'll be just like Neil and David!" He pouts. "Have you seen Neil's Instagram? They're like the perfect gay dads."

"After you guys, of course." Holden amends for him quickly, giving us a knowing wink.
"Well, obviously." Ryan rolls his eyes. "I mean, look at you two. Five kids and you still look like that?! It's insane. You're like superheroes or something."

That's one I've never heard before.

"Yeah, Diaper-Man and Binky Boy. Saving the world from tantrums one child at a time, right?" I chuckle softly, giving Tommy a gentle nudge with my elbow.

"Yeah." He smiles, but just like before I can tell it's not really genuine. "I'm gonna get another drink to celebrate. Anyone else want one?"

"We can just order from the waitress," Holden tells him. "It's one of the expensive perks of reserving a table up here."

"She's busy, this'll be faster."

We reluctantly place our drink orders with him, but when I offer to accompany him to the bar and help him carry everything back he assures me that he's got it. Again, my instinct is to follow him. But again, I know that's not going to help improve his mood. At this point, I'm not sure anything will. If Holden and Ryan hadn't just made such an important announcement, I'd be tempted to fake a sudden illness as an excuse for us to leave early.

The rest of the evening is basically more of the same. We chat about kids and work in between Holden and Ryan's many trips down to the dance floor, and Tommy sits there and smiles and makes monosyllabic comments every so often in a half-hearted attempt to avoid having anyone question his mood. I manage to excuse us just before midnight by pulling out the 'gotta get the kids up for school in the morning' card, and Tommy and I leave Holden and Ryan to drink and dance the night away. Thankfully they were both tipsy enough most of the time that they didn't seem to notice how distant Tommy was or how worried I was about him. I know neither of us wanted to ruin their night, and it looks as though we've somehow successfully avoided it.

Tommy is quiet the entire drive home. Once or twice I attempt to make some kind of small talk, just to see if I can coax him out of his own head for a few minutes. But other than a couple of one word answers, he doesn't respond to anything I say. So when I finally pull the car into the driveway, and he makes a move to get out, I quickly press the button to lock all the doors. As soon as he hears the sound of his escape route disappearing, he sighs deeply and slumps in his seat.

"I don't wanna do this." He mutters before I can even broach the subject of his bad mood with him. "I'm tired."

"So am I. But I know that if we go in that house right now, you're just gonna go to bed without talking about it. And then you're gonna wake up tomorrow and act like it never happened, and when I ask you about it you'll say you're over it. You've been saying you're over it for weeks, but you're not."

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"Adam." I reply directly as he stares at me like he seriously has no clue what I'm trying to say. "You're still upset about him not wanting you to play for him anymore. If you weren't, you wouldn't have jumped off of me mid-kiss and made up an excuse about needing to use the bathroom just because one of his songs came on. And you wouldn't have spent the rest of the night moping."

"You think that's what I was upset about?" He asks incredulously, exhaling a bitter chuckle. "You're so fucking slow sometimes, it's ridiculous."
If he thinks he can insult his way out of dealing with this, he's sorely mistaken. "I know what I saw, Tommy."

"No, you know shit!" He snaps, causing me to literally lean back in my seat as a result of the harshness in his tone. "Yeah, hearing that song got to me. For like a minute. I was over it before I even came back from the bathroom."

"So what the hell were you so pissed off about all night?"

"What the fuck do you think?" He's looking at me like I really should know the answer to this question, but I don't. So all I can do is sit here and shrug helplessly, knowing that my lack of insight into his emotions is only going to piss him off more. "You seriously don't know?"

"I don't!"

"Two months ago I told you that I didn't want us to just talk about having another kid, I wanted to do something about it."

"I...I didn't-"

"No, you didn't. You didn't say anything about it, you didn't do anything about it, you haven't even fucking hinted at the subject again since!"

"Neither have you!" I exclaim defensively.

"Both times we've talked about it, I was the one who brought it up. And both times, you just let it go. It was pretty fucking obvious that you weren't in any hurry to even look into the idea, and I wasn't gonna hound you about it until you gave in just to keep me happy. That's not what I wanted. I wanted you to want it as much as I do. But if you wanted it, you would have said something about it by now, so clearly you don't. And that's fine or whatever, but you could've at least fucking told me you didn't wanna do it instead of just pretending like I never even mentioned it."

"Tommy-"

He reaches across me and unlocks the doors, and he's already out in the driveway and slamming the door shut again before I even have a chance to unbuckle my seatbelt. By the time I've made it into the house he's halfway to our bedroom, and when I reach the doorway I find him grabbing his pillow off of the bed and stalking back towards me.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm gonna sleep in the movie room."

"Would you please just stop for a second and talk to me?"

He finally does stop and turn to face me, but I can already tell it's not so that he can hear me out. "No. If we talk about it, I'm gonna get even more pissed off than I already am. And then I'm gonna start yelling, and I don't wanna wake the kids."

"Tommy-"

"Just... drop it, Taylor." He sighs tiredly as he begins walking away from me again. "You've done a great job of it so far."

All I want to do is follow him to the movie room and force him to hear me out. But I know he won't
believe anything I say to him right now, even if it's the truth. He'll think I'm just looking for a way to end the fight. I need to at least let him cool off before I try talking to him about all of this again, because clearly it's a much more sensitive subject than I realized.

It just feels wrong to be under the same roof as him and not share a bed with him. The only times we've slept apart since he moved in are the handful of times one of us has gone out of town for work. And as difficult as that distance was, somehow this one is even worse. He's doesn't want to be near me right now. It's not like this is our first fight, far from it. And it's not the first time one of us has left a room when things have gotten heated. But it's the first time a fight has led to us sleeping in separate rooms.

Not that I see myself doing any sleeping tonight.

I can't believe I screwed this up so badly and I didn't even realize I was doing it! As usual, in trying to do the right thing I have somehow only succeeded in hurting someone I love. When I think back over everything that was said tonight, all of the excitement surrounding Holden and Ryan's announcement, and the baby-centric conversations that followed, all I can do is cringe and wish I'd known what it was doing to Tommy. He was sitting right there beside me, becoming more and more miserable by the second, and I had no idea why.

I feel like such an idiot!

I know he said he didn't want to talk about it because he didn't want to yell and wake the kids, but maybe there's a way we can avoid that. Or at least make it so that no one will hear him if he yells...

It's around three in the morning when I pick my iPhone up off of the nightstand beside the bed and open my text messages. There are a couple of unread ones waiting to be seen, but nothing important enough to distract me from my original plans. I pull up my conversation with Tommy and quickly type a new message.

You awake?

I'm half expecting my question to go unanswered, either because he's asleep or because he still has no interest in talking to me. But after only a few seconds I receive a reply.

Yeah

It's a start, at least. He didn't ignore me, which has to be a good sign... right?

If I come in there, are you gonna get mad?

This time I get no reply. I stare at the screen, willing a message to appear. Even if it's one that tells me that he still doesn't want to speak to me or even be in a room with me. The only thing that tears my gaze from the phone is the sound of the door handle turning as someone enters the room.

"Hey..."

"Hey." He sighs wearily, closing the door behind him and slowly making his way over to the bed. I watch as he places his pillow down in the empty spot beside mine before climbing onto the mattress with me and lying down on his side so that we're face-to-face in the darkness. "I'm sorry I was a jerk."

"You weren't. You were upset-"

"And I was a jerk about it."
"I should've known what was bothering you, though. If I wasn't such a clueless idiot, I would have realized why you were acting the way you were tonight and I would have done something about it instead of making it worse."

He shakes his head faintly, his eyes leaving mine and fixing themselves on something beyond me. "It wasn't your fault. And it wasn't even the baby thing. Not all of it, anyway."

"I don't understand..." I begin hesitantly, not wanting to ruin this peace we've made by being oblivious to his feelings again. "If that wasn't it, what was it?"

"I just feels like everyone's got something, you know? Everyone's doing something. You're writing and recording for an album and planning a tour, Isaac and Sophie just bought a house, Lisa just got promoted again, Adam's got a new album coming out, Holden and Ryan are having a kid, Phases is really starting to get attention lately, and it's like I can't even fucking go on Facebook or Instagram anymore without seeing someone I know announcing they're engaged, or pregnant, or just got their dream job, or whatever... everyone's got something they're excited about or working towards. And I feel like I'm just... here, you know? I'm not doing anything. I'm not going anywhere. I'm stuck."

"Oh."

"And I don't want you to freak out and think that I'm like totally unhappy, or that you and the kids aren't enough for me. You are, it's just..."

"It's not about that, though." I reassure him understandingly. "You and the kids are enough for me, too, but I still have my career. And I'm sure Ryan is enough for Holden and Z is enough for Alex, but they all still want to keep moving forward in some way."

"Right." He murmurs softly, sadly. "And I just feel like... I can't move forward until I figure out what the hell I want. And I hate that I have no fucking idea what that is most days."

"Honestly? That's why I haven't brought up the baby thing since you mentioned it a couple of months ago." I admit, still feeling incredibly cautious about this subject. "I didn't know exactly how you felt, but I knew you weren't really sure what you wanted. The last time we talked about it was the day you had lunch with Adam, and you were upset and looking for something good to hold on to... and I guess I was worried that you latched on to the idea of us having a baby because you needed something to look forward to. Like... you needed some kind of purpose and you thought that might be it. And I know that's not going to be the answer; I watched Natalie do it for years. I figured that if it was really something you wanted, and if you wanted it for the right reasons, you'd bring it up again once things had settled down and you'd had time to really think about it."

To my surprise, he starts to laugh quietly. He turns his head towards his pillow for a moment, burying his face in it as I watch his shoulders shake with amusement until he manages to calm himself down enough to talk.

"I didn't bring it up again because I didn't wanna pressure you. I thought that if you really wanted it, you'd say something. And when you didn't, I figured you were like... avoiding it and hoping I'd just get over it. Which is totally fair. I mean, you have five kids already and you were pressured into having all of them. I didn't wanna do that to you again. I wanted it to be your choice this time. And if you chose not to do it, I'd just have to deal."

There's no way I can not kiss him after the things he's just said. I lived most of my life according to the expectations of others, even if those expectations were only perceived and never verbalized. Then Tommy came along, and everything changed. He's never pressured me into doing anything that I didn't want to do, or talked me out of doing anything that I wanted to do. And he's lying here
telling me that he wants to have a baby with me, but if I don't want the same thing it's okay.

This is so completely different to how this conversation has ever gone for me before.

"I love you."

"I know." He smiles against my lips, nudging the tip of his nose gently against mine. "I love you, too."

"If I tell you I want to have a baby with you, will you believe me?"

I wait patiently, unblinkingly, while he searches my eyes for the truth. "Swear on my life that you're not saying that just 'cause I threw a fit like a fucking toddler?"

"I swear."

"Really?" He presses insistently. "Because I don't wanna do this if you don't really wanna do it."

"I swear on your life, and my life, and the lives of everyone we care about that I'm not just saying this to make you happy or because I feel like I have to." I tell him whole-heartedly. "I want to do this with you."

"So... we're seriously gonna wake up tomorrow and really do something about this instead of not talking about it for another month?"

"It's almost four in the morning. The odds of either of us being able to function at all tomorrow are pretty slim at this point." I chuckle softly as I place a gentle kiss on his lips. "But yeah. We're going to wake up, and I'm going to drink obscene amounts of coffee, and we're really going to do something about this."

"Promise?"

"Pinky swear?" I offer playfully, holding up my hand with my pinky extended towards him.

But instead of curling his pinky around mine, he grabs my hand and pulls it to his mouth, closing his lips around my finger before teasingly drawing it back out again. And suddenly I'm feeling a lot more awake than I was a minute ago.

"We're gonna be zombies all day if we don't get some sleep..." I warn him as he grins at me mischievously and pushes me onto my back. "The kids need to be up for school in a few hours."

"But I'm up right now." He tells me, climbing on top of me and grinding his erection against mine to demonstrate his point. "Besides, if we're gonna have a baby, you need to get used to barely getting any sleep at night."

"If we're going to have a baby, you need to get used to sleeping every spare second you get!"

"I will." He assures me unconvincingly, kissing his way down the center of my chest. "Starting tomorrow night."

"Right."

"Or the night after..."
I think both Tommy and I were under the foolish impression that this whole surrogacy thing was going to be a lot easier than it looks like it's actually going to be.

I was prepared for it to be expensive, like really expensive, and for us to maybe have to try a few times before the IVF treatments were successful. I wasn't prepared for everything else, all of the steps we're going to have to take and hoops we're going to have to jump through before we even get to the point of starting the first round of IVF.

I don't know why I thought it would be simple at all. Maybe it was because Asta was the only baby that Natalie and I ever had to really try for. My other four kids were first attempts. Within a week or two of Natalie convincing me that we should have another baby, she'd announce that she was ovulating. We'd have more sex over the next few days than we usually had in an entire month, and a few weeks later she'd be peeing on a stick and crying tears of joy. And even though I knew it wouldn't be that quick and easy for Tommy and I to have a baby, I still underestimated just how complex it's going to be.

It's not as straightforward as picking out a donor and a surrogate, and having Tommy spend some alone time with a plastic cup. Once we've picked our egg donor and surrogate, and they've agreed to work with us, we have to deal with the legalities of the surrogacy arrangement and Tommy has to undergo some tests (he's not particularly excited about having his sperm count checked). If that goes well, the egg donor and surrogate have to start treatment to get their cycles synced up.

Then the 'magic' happens.

Tommy gets friendly with another plastic cup, the egg donor goes through an 'egg retrieval' process, and then the IVF clinic will do their thing and hopefully create several fertilized embryos. One or two of them will be transferred to the surrogate... and then we wait.

It takes a couple of minutes to explain it, but it could take more than a couple of months to actually do it.

I could tell just by the look on Tommy's face as we did our initial research yesterday morning that he
was starting to feel more than a little overwhelmed and disheartened. It went from being this amazing thing that we were both so excited about, to being this daunting thing that we weren't sure how to approach. Once we'd sufficiently freaked ourselves out, I did what I probably should have done from the start.

I called Holden.

He was more than happy to explain the entire process from the point of view of someone who was still going through it. He didn't sugar coat any of it, but he somehow made it sound less painful than any of the websites we'd visited. And he even gave us the name of the agency and clinic that he and Ryan are working with, as well as a few others that they had seriously considered before making their final choice. All of them have a lot of experience working with same sex couples, and he assured us that the majority of surrogates and donors are willing to work with same sex couples, too. We called and set up appointments with three agencies for tomorrow.

In some ways it seems like we're rushing. But it feels like we've unintentionally wasted enough time already, we don't want to wait around and waste any more. We could've had a pregnant surrogate by now if we'd started this process last Halloween when Tommy first brought it up. Or even if we'd started it in March when he mentioned it again, we'd still be much further along. But there's no use dwelling on what could have been different, because there's no way to change it. All we can do is get things moving as quickly as we can now.

Or tomorrow, since there's nothing we can do about it tonight.

We agreed that we each get to tell one person (besides Holden) about our plans. We're both too excited to keep it completely to ourselves. Tommy chose to tell Isaac, which is where he has disappeared to for the evening. And I chose to tell Zac. It was really hard to choose between him and Alex, but he's always been the person I tell everything to. It wouldn't feel right telling anyone else before him.

Which means that my will power is going to undergo some serious testing when Alex comes over in an hour or so...

After making sure that Asta is still sound asleep and that her older siblings are preoccupied with various pre-bedtime books in their rooms, I shut myself away in my own bedroom and eagerly call my little brother.

"Hey!" He answers cheerfully after a handful of rings. "I wasn't expecting you to call tonight."

"Are you busy?"

"Nah, just messing around with some painting and stuff."

I smile to myself as I sit down on the edge of the bed. "What're you working on?"

"It's... not really anything." He replies self-deprecatingly. "I was listening to that demo we finished last week and it kinda sparked this idea that wouldn't quit buggin' me, so..."

"I hate it when that happens."

"Right? It's like, leave me alone! I'm trying to watch a freakin' movie over here!"

"Although, knowing you, it was probably a movie you've already seen about fifty times." I tease him knowingly.
"More like seventy-five, but that's not the point. It's rude to interrupt!"

"It is. So are you sure I'm not interrupting? I can call back tomorrow."

"You're fine." I hear him chuckle softly. "What's up?"

"I have a secret."

"Ooooh."

"I wanna tell you, but you can't tell anyone. Not Ike, or mom and dad, and definitely not Kate."

"Is it something really good?" He questions in his most serious tone. "'Cause I don't wanna put a bunch of effort into keeping a secret if it's totally lame."

"It's definitely not lame." I assure him, listening as he takes a deep, apprehensive breath on the other end of the line. "It's good news, I promise."

"Okay, hit me."

"Tommy and I... we're gonna have another baby." I wait for him to say something, even if it's just to crack a joke about me becoming such a girl that I've grown a uterus. But he's entirely silent. "Hello?"

"Hi."

"Did you hear what I said?"

"Yeah..." He answers slowly. "I'm not sure I totally understand what you said, but..."

"Well, we talked about it and we decided we wanted to have another kid."

"How come? You already have enough for a basketball team."

That's one way of looking at it, I guess. "We need a substitute incase one of them gets injured.""Good thinking."

"I always told Tommy that if he ever wanted to have a kid, it was an option. And he's decided that he does."

"But is that what you want?" If it weren't for the obvious concern in his voice, I might be annoyed that he's questioning this so much. "I mean, you have a track record of agreeing to procreate just to keep other people happy."

"This is completely different." I insist earnestly, hoping he can hear how sincere I am. "I want this as much as he does. I want him to know what it feels like to be a dad."

"I thought you said that he thinks of your kids like they're his own."

"He does. He loves them, he'd do anything for them, and as far as we're both concerned he is their dad."

"So...?"

"It's different. He never got to be there to watch any of them being born, or name them, or know how it feels the first time they wrap their tiny little fingers around your pinky and hold on tighter than
you'd ever think they could. He missed out on all of those things, and more, and I don't want him to miss out. Nothing compares to those experiences, or the feeling of looking at your kid and knowing that they're part of you. There's nothing like it, you know that. He deserves to know what it feels like. I *want* him to know."

"I guess."

"Should I take that as 'congratulations'??" I sigh, kicking my heal against the hardwood floor sullenly.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to rain on your Pride parade or anything, I was just trying to understand the whole thing. If this is really what you want, and *you're* happy, then I'm happy for you."

"Really?"

"Really." He promises me honestly. "But I'm warning you now, it's gonna be my least favorite of all your kids."

"Hey!"

"Don't worry, I won't let on. It'll be our little secret."

I probably shouldn't be laughing right now, but I know he's only kidding. At least, I hope he is...

"Jackass."

Since we talk so frequently anyway, our conversation doesn't last much longer. There's nothing new for either of us to report, and we'll probably end up studio skyping in a couple of days anyway. I let him get back to his painting and I make a quick stop at each of my kids bedrooms to tell them it's time to turn the lights off and get some sleep. As always, this announcement is met with nothing but whining and pleas for "five more minutes."

In an effort to pass the time before Alex arrives (and avoid going back online and looking at more surrogacy websites), I head into the family room and start picking up the toys that were left all over the floor and sofa the second I ordered the kids to go and brush their teeth. Usually I make them clean up their own messes, but sometimes it's quicker and easier to just do it myself. Especially on nights like this, when both Jenna and Tommy are out somewhere and I'm parenting solo. The kids' toys aren't the only ones scattered throughout the house; Duke has more than his fair share, too. And as soon as I put them away in his toy basket in the family room, he takes them out again one by one and puts them back *exactly* where I picked them up from.

He's *worse* than the kids.

Alex shows up right on time, and as an added bonus he brought a six pack of Lagunitas with him. Sometimes I think he and I have some kind of psychic link. I think "a beer would be good right now", and he shows up with beer!

We take our drinks out onto the kitchen terrace to enjoy the comfortable warmth of the late May evening, and for a while after we've taken our seats neither of us says a word. It's nice. My days are often pretty hectic, and sometimes it feels like I spend most of my time talking. To just be still and silent, especially in the presence of someone other than Tommy, is rare for me. I can tell that Alex needs this moment of peace just as much as I do, and I don't feel any need to fill the space with pointless chatter. So we sit side by side and sip our beers as we stare out into the darkness around us.

"Where's the old ballgag and chain tonight?" He finally asks, glancing behind us into the kitchen as though he's expecting to see Tommy standing there glaring at him.
"He's with his boyfriend."

"I thought I was his boyfriend."

"I think he sees you as more of a clingy one night stand that he could never get rid of."

He tips his beer to his lips slowly, seeming to contemplate this information for a moment or two before nodding in approval. "Yeah, that's about how I see him, too."

"So how's life?" I ask him, resting my feet on one of the empty patio chairs beside me. "Ready for the craziness that comes with having a new single out?"

"I was born ready."

"I heard it on the radio when I was driving the kids to school the other day."

"Oh yeah?" He smiles proudly.

"Yeah, I told them it was your song and they made me turn it all the way up. They were dancing in the back seat so much that I swear the car was probably bouncing down the street. River has declared it 'his jam'."

"They have excellent taste."

"I like to think so."

"How about you? Still working on the new album?"

"Yeah..." I sigh tiredly, thinking about the huge amount of work still left to get done in the small amount of time we have left before we start recording the final tracks. "It's coming along. Sometimes I think that this whole long distance thing is the worst way to write music, but other days it seems like it helps us all stay more focused."

"I can see that." He nods in understanding. "And you probably get a chance to develop your own ideas more fully before having the two of them come along and start making 'helpful suggestions', right?"

"And vice versa." I chuckle softly, entirely aware of my control freak tendencies towards every aspect of our music. "I think it's good for us, though. Like you said, we get to work on our own ideas before we let each other in on it. We never really had that before."

"Is Tommy helping you write and stuff?"

"Hmm... yes and no. Sometimes he'll help me work through something when I'm really blocked, or he'll hang out in the studio while I'm recording and help out with the technical side of things. But a lot of the time he just stays out of it completely, like he won't even come into the studio. He says he doesn't think it's a good idea for him to have any input, which I think is bullshit."

"I guess I can see where he's coming from, you know?" Alex sympathizes. "I mean, if it was your music, that might be different. But it's not your music, it's Hanson's music. And he's not a member of Hanson, so..."

"I know, but we've co-written songs with other artists before, and we've worked with plenty of musicians on our other albums."

"But you weren't married to any of them. He probably doesn't want everyone thinking that he's using
his relationship with you to advance his own career in some way. You know how weird he gets about that shit."

"Yeah." Boy, do I know.

"Speaking of his career... how's he doing with the whole Adam thing now?" He asks almost worriedly. "Any more drunken disappearing acts?"

"No, thank god." I sigh, leaning my head back against the cold metal of the chair. "He seems to be okay with it, mostly. He's not happy about it, but I think it's less about not working with Adam anymore and more about the fact that he doesn't know where to go from here."

"What do you mean?"

"He doesn't know what he wants to do next. He was playing with some other band to kind of pass the time until Adam needed him again. But he wasn't really into it, so he quit. And then Adam basically fired him without any real explanation, so now he's just..."

"Drifting?" Offers Alex uncertainly.

"Sometimes it looks a hell of a lot more like sinking. I hate seeing him like this, because he's so fucking talented. He deserves to be doing something amazing, not sitting around feeling like everything he does is a waste of time so he shouldn't even bother trying."

"Well, he's always welcome to come and play some shows with us. I know our music isn't really his style, but whether he'll let us credit him or not, he really helped us figure out how to get the sound we were going for on the new album. Hell, 'Vertigo' basically evolved from some random bit of music he was playing. I fucking love that song, and it wouldn't be what it is if it weren't for him. He has a really good ear."

"He does." I smile fondly, wishing Tommy could hear this for himself. But I know he still wouldn't believe it. "It kills me that he has no idea how good he really is. He honestly thinks that you and I and Adam are somehow better than him just because we can write lyrics and sing or whatever."

"He doesn't need to be able to do that shit to be relevant. If you ask me, what he does is a hell of a lot harder than what we do. We try to convey an emotion or a thought through our lyrics, we spell it out for people. He does the same thing with his music, but he does it without using a single word."

"I know. But trying to convince him of that fact is like trying to convince you not to grab my ass."

His mouth falls open in disbelief. "Impossible!"

"Exactly!" I exclaim, throwing my hands up in defeat. "I just wish I knew how to support him. I don't want to push him into doing anything, but I don't want to stand by and do nothing when he seems so directionless. I don't know what he needs from me right now, and I'm not used to feeling that way at all."

"He probably doesn't know what he needs, either." Alex assures me as he places a comforting hand on my arm and gives it a gentle squeeze. "But he'll figure it out eventually. Maybe all he needs you to do is exactly what you're already doing."

"So... nothing?"

"It's not nothing. It might feel like nothing to you, but I'm sure it helps him to know that he can talk this stuff out with you when he needs to. That's what's gonna help him figure out his next step."
I hope so.

Alex stays until the six pack is finished, and we spend the entire time bouncing back and forth from serious topics of conversation to the most pointless and inane things you can possibly imagine. It's a pretty normal night for us.

Even though his original plan was to hang out until Tommy came home so that he'd have the chance to see him, too, when there's still no sign of him by midnight Alex decides to call it a night. And being one of those boring parents who rarely stays up past eleven pm, I can barely keep my eyes open anyway. I honestly wouldn't be surprised if Tommy has passed out on Isaac and Sophie's couch, and that's why he's still not home by the time I crawl into bed.

But only an hour after I slip into some much needed unconsciousness, I'm pulled out of it by the feel of Tommy's lips on my shoulder blade and his arm sliding around my waist. At first I think he's just settling into bed for the night, and I'm more than happy to close my eyes and fall asleep with him. But when he starts nudging me in the back with his nose between each feather light kiss, I know he's trying to get my attention.

I sigh softly, reaching up and lacing my fingers with his as I pull his arm more snugly around me. "What's up?"

"Nothin'." We both know that's a lie, but I also know that he'll tell me the truth a lot faster if I just keep my mouth shut and let him work up the nerve to say whatever it is he needs to say. "Are you nervous?"

"Nervous?" I ask, forcing myself to wake up a little more and try to figure out what he means. "About what?"

"Visiting the agencies and stuff tomorrow."

"Not really. I mean... why would I be?"

"Cause they might hate us and not wanna help us." He mumbles against my skin, and I can't help but smile as I roll over in his arms until the tips of our noses are almost touching. "No one looks at me and thinks, 'wow, that guy would make an awesome parent.'"

"That's because some people are judgmental assholes."

"So what if the people at the agencies are like that?"

"Even if they are, they're not gonna turn us away just because you have tattoos." I assure him earnestly. "Holden recommended all of these places. He and Ryan already met with all of them, and he said they were great."

"Yeah, but Holden and Ryan are this perfect, preppy couple compared to us. They're like a walking, talking, gay Gap ad."

"I'll tell them you said so."

"You know what I mean." He sighs, kicking me lightly in the shin under the sheets. "They look like they'd make good parents."

"Yeah, and we already do make good parents." I can tell that nothing I've said is making him feel any better, so in an attempt to at least get him to look me in the eyes, I trace my fingertips lightly along his jaw line. "You're worrying over nothing."
"You don't know that."

"Wanna bet?"

"I just... don't wanna fuck this up for us." He admits so quietly that I can barely understand what he said.

If we were even just a few inches further apart right now, maybe I wouldn't have heard him. But I did. It hurts so much to know how little he thinks of himself, and for a moment I can't think of anything to say.

"Look at me." Of course he immediately starts to turn his face away from mine, so I gently (but firmly) use my fingers to coax it back towards me. "Baby, look at me." He sighs heavily, refusing to meet my eyes for a few more seconds before he finally gives in. "Do you trust me?"

"That's a stupid question."

"If you trust me then you believe I wouldn't lie to you." I continue undeterred. "So believe me when I tell you that you are not going to fuck this up. No one is going to refuse to work with us just because you don't look like you stepped right out of a country club. It's gonna be fine, I promise. We're just gonna meet some people and ask some questions, and nothing terrible is going to happen."

"Great, now you've gone and fucking jinxed it." He mutters, prompting me to roll my eyes at him as he slowly starts to smile.

"So then if anything does go wrong tomorrow, it'll be my fault."

"I can live with that."

"But you know what we can do to drastically improve our chances of making a good first impression on the nice people guarding the lists of rentable ovaries and uteruses?"

"Offer them sexual favors?" He suggests oh-so-innocently.

This time it's my turn to kick him under the sheets. "Sleep."
While Tommy may be nervous about what the surrogacy agencies might think of us, I am admittedly a little more concerned with what the kids will have to say about this whole thing. We've agreed not to say anything to them until after we've sat down with the various agencies and have more of an idea what our options are and what to expect. We figured there's no point in bringing it up when we ourselves don't necessarily have the answers to all of the potential questions the kids might ask. Once we are better informed, we will be in a position to better explain everything to them.

At least, that's the assumption we're working under.

But until then, I'm going to feel as though I'm lying to them. I haven't actually lied to any of them about it, but just knowing that Tommy and I are looking into expanding our family without mentioning it to them feels deceptive. Which is crazy, because it's not like Natalie and I ran it by them each time we tried for a baby. But for some reason, this feels different. I don't know if it's because they're all a little older now, or because of everything they've been through over the last few years. I just know that I don't want to keep this from them any longer than we absolutely have to.

Hopefully, after today, we'll have enough answers to be able to talk to the kids about it.

Our first appointment is with an agency in Beverly Hills. It's the same agency that Holden and Ryan have been using, and Holden had nothing but good things to say about them. Knowing that makes it easier for me to stay calm and composed as we make our way to the agency's offices, but Tommy seems to become more and more anxious by the minute. Beverly Hills in general makes him feel uncomfortable (he once compared himself to Julia Roberts in 'Pretty Woman', if that gives you any idea how inadequate he feels in this particular neighborhood). So pairing Beverly Hills with an entirely unfamiliar place like a surrogacy agency has him even more on edge than he was before. I'd be lying if I said I was totally unaffected by it all; I want this to go as well as he does. But over the years I've become an expert at putting on a professional facade to disguise my nerves.

I don't like it, but sometimes it's necessary.

"I shoulda worn a nicer shirt." Sighs Tommy as I finish feeding the parking meter just down the street from the agency. "You look like a grown up and I look like I don't give a shit."
"You look fine." I tell him honestly, leaning in to offer him a kiss which he barely accepts because he's too busy looking at this pants. "You're not interviewing for a job on Wall Street. You're not interviewing at all. If anything, they're the ones who need to convince us to work with them, not the other way around. They aren't the ones who're gonna be shelling out thousands and thousands of dollars."

"They're not even gonna believe I have thousands and thousands of dollars if I go in there looking like this." He grumbles, grudgingly allowing me to take his hand and lead him over to the main entrance of the building.

I come to a stop just in front of the door, causing him to almost walk right into me, and I turn to face him as I take both of his hands in mine. "Stop beating yourself up. You look fine and everything is going to be fine."

"You could at least pretend to be nervous."

"How would that help?"

"It would make me feel like less of an idiot."

"Or it'd make you even more nervous than you already are." I counter knowingly. "Come on, we're gonna be late."

"We're always late." He points out with a hint of a smile. "Ever since you moved here I've been running on 'Hanson Time'."

"It's not my fault, it's genetic!"

We make our way through the lobby of the office building and over to the elevators. The agency has the entire second floor to themselves, and I can't decide if that's a good or bad thing. On the one hand, the bigger the agency, the bigger (I would assume) their selection of surrogates and donors must be. But it's also a little intimidating and makes me worry that they'll lack the more personal touch we were hoping for. I want to work with a company that actually cares about matching us with the right person to carry our child. I don't want to have to sift through dozens of profiles for people who have absolutely nothing in common with us just because the agency employees are too busy to do it for us. Considering how much they're going to want us to pay them just to find us a surrogate, I would hope they're going to do a hell of a lot more than merely throwing paperwork at us.

The receptionist seems friendly enough, and she offers us something to drink while we're waiting for our 'Intended Parent Coordinator'. But Tommy's too fidgety to be bothered by basic bodily needs like hydration, and I think it's in the best interests of everyone in this office if I refrain from putting any more caffeine in my system than I already have this morning.

There are a few other couples seated in the waiting room, and all of them seem nervous. Not nearly as nervous as Tommy, who can't stop jiggling his leg no matter how many times I place my hand on his knee and try to settle him, but still nervous. Some of them flip disinterestedly through magazines, others sit in silence and stare across the room in anticipation. We all watch two of the couples being approached by cheerful looking women in pristine pant suits, and then they disappear behind closed doors just down the hall from the front desk. It seems as though the tension in the air becomes more palpable after they leave for their appointments, like we're all acutely aware that we could be next.

It's not long before a young, impeccably dressed red head hurries up to the front desk with the most professional looking power walk I think I've ever seen. The receptionist nods in our direction, and as soon as the woman begins walking purposefully towards us, Tommy and I immediately get out of
our seats. She smiles brightly when she comes to a stop in front of us, holding out her hand for one of us to shake.

"Hi, I'm Alyssa." She introduces herself as Tommy quickly shakes her hand. "I'm one of the Intended Parent Coordinators here."

"I'm Tommy."

"I'm Taylor." I smile back as warmly as I can. "Nice to meet you."

"Why don't you guys come on back to my office and we can go over any questions you have. Would either of you like some coffee, or water, or-"

"No, thanks. We're fine." I cut her off quickly before she has a chance to list off the entire beverage selection that the receptionist already offered us.

"Well just let me know if you change your minds." She insists kindly as we follow her out of the waiting room and down to her office. "I hope I didn't keep you waiting too long. I was finishing up a call with a client and I hate rushing people to wrap up a conversation."

Score one for Alyssa. "Oh, no, we just got here."

"Great, well, please have a seat." Tommy hangs back and waits for me to sit down on one end of a small couch by the window before taking a seat beside me, and my hand automatically searches for his as soon as he's settled. Alyssa grabs a pad and pen off of her desk nearby and sits in the chair opposite us, and I suddenly have a flashback to being in Ezra's therapist's office. "So... why don't you tell me a little bit about yourselves and what it is you're looking for?"

"Uh..." Where do we even start? "Well... we've been married for about a year-"

"But we've been together a lot longer than that." Adds Tommy, almost as though he thinks we'll get more points depending on the length of our relationship. "We've known each other for like five years."

"Right." I laugh softly, giving his hand a gentle squeeze. "And we already have five kids."

"Wow!" Alyssa's eyes grow noticeably wider in astonishment. "Five kids in five years?"

"Oh, no, I was married for several years before Tommy and I got together. My kids are from my previous relationship."

"Ah, okay."

"Their mom passed away a few years ago."

"Oh, I'm so sorry." She commiserates sincerely. "That must have been incredibly difficult for them, and for you."

"It definitely wasn't the easiest year of our lives." I acknowledge, finding myself needing to take a deep breath just from the thought of it. "But they're all doing really well now, thanks to Tommy."

He blushes instantly, which never fails to make me smile. "I didn't really do anything. I mean... I was kinda just there."

"Exactly."
"I'm sure having that support made all the difference." She concurs, which only serves to turn his cheeks an even deeper shade of pink. "How old are your children now?"

"Well, our oldest son is almost thirteen," Shit, when did that happen? "Our oldest daughter just turned ten, then we have an eight year old son, a six and a half year old son, and our youngest daughter is almost three and a half."

"That sounds exhausting." Laughs Alyssa, shaking her head in awe. "I have one little girl and she keeps me on my toes."

"Yeah, it can get a little hectic."

"But we're used to it." Tommy insists, doing his utmost to act like it's no big deal. "We've got a good routine going, and we have a live-in sitter who helps out a lot."

"If you don't mind me asking, with five children at home, what made you decide to have another?"

"Well... like Tommy said, we're used to the craziness. We love our kids, and we feel like we make a pretty great parenting team."

"Yeah, and we're just... not done, I guess." Tommy chuckles bashfully, looking to me for backup.

"We never planned on having any more kids, because five was already a lot. But we've been talking about it, and we both feel like this is something that would make our family feel complete."

"Not that it doesn't feel complete right now or anything."

"It's okay, I understand." She smiles encouragingly in an attempt to assuage his need to clarify every little thing that I say, and I nudge him playfully with my shoulder. "I assume you contacted us because you're looking to work with a gestational surrogate?"

"Yeah."

"Do you already have a friend or family member in mind to act as an egg donor, or will you need our help finding one?"

"Oh, well... we hadn't really discussed the possibility of asking someone we know." I begin uncertainly, glancing at Tommy to see his reaction. "Would that be better?"

"No, not necessarily. Some couples prefer to use someone they know personally rather than an anonymous donor. Or they want their baby to have both of their genetics, in which case they might ask a sibling to be the donor."

"Huh..." Tommy looks mildly intrigued, but honestly all I feel is weirded out.

"I think we'll probably have to talk about that part a little more."

"Of course! It's an important decision and you should take as much time as you need. We can give you access to our online database of donors today, if you'd like, but you're under no obligation to use any of them even if you do decide to work with our agency."

"Thanks, that's good to know."

"Having said that, I want to assure you that all of our donors are thoroughly screened, as are our gestational surrogates. In fact, we have our gestational surrogates undergo the required medical and psychological testing in advance. A lot of agencies only perform the testing once the surrogate has
been matched with a couple."

"Does that save time?" I ask hopefully.

"Not a significant amount, but it can definitely take a few weeks off of the process. More importantly, though, it saves you from having to worry that a surrogate you select might not pass the required tests. It's been known to happen, and it can be incredibly disappointing for couples to feel as though they've found someone that they would be willing to trust with this incredibly important and personal undertaking, only to find out that the person they've chosen isn't eligible for some reason."

"So how does the agency 'match' us with a surrogate?" Tommy frowns curiously. "And do you match us with more than one in case we don't like the one you picked for us?"

"Every surrogate completes a very in depth profile once they're accepted into the program. It covers everything from their favorite music to religious beliefs, and anything in between, as well as why they want to be a surrogate and what their hopes are for this experience. The two of you will answer a lot of similar questions for us, and then we'll search our database and select the profiles we feel best match your preferences. Then we'll send all of those profiles to you, and you will make the final selection. Normally, we try to provide intended parents with at least five potential matches."

"And if we don't like any of them?"

"We'll look again. There are new surrogates contracting with us every day. It may not happen right away, but I feel confident saying that we will find you a match. We've honestly never had intended parents cancel their contract with us because we've failed to find them a surrogate they love."

"But they have to like us, too, right?" I ask worriedly. "They could turn us down?"

"They could, yes. But I very rarely see that happen. Like I said, we try to match people based on a lot of very important criteria, as well as basic things you may have in common. It's unusual that intended parents meet with a surrogate and have the surrogate come away unhappy with the match and unwilling to work with the parents."

"And what about the egg donor? Do they have to agree to work with us, too?"

"Not if it's an anonymous donor." She clarifies. "If you want to have contact with the donor before making a selection, then there is always the chance that they will choose not to work with you. But the majority of the time there is no contact between the intended parents and their chosen donor. Neither party knows the other's names, and they aren't provided with any identifying information about you."

"So if we sign up with you today or whatever, how soon would we get profiles for surrogates?" Asks Tommy keenly, and I have to bite back a chuckle at how eager he is. Judging by the amusement in Alyssa's eyes, I'd say she's having the same problem.

"That can vary, depending on the criteria you provide us with. But I would say that we should be able to send you at least a few matches within two business days of you submitting your profile to us."

"Are you guys open on weekends?"

This time there's no way I can suppress my laughter, and neither can Alyssa as Tommy playfully tries to shrug me off when I wrap my arm around him and pull him close enough to kiss his cheek.

Really, the other two agencies we had appointments with didn't stand a chance. Not that they weren't
friendly, and knowledgeable, and professional, and all of the other things we would want them to be. They both came close to winning us over. But Alyssa had already made a good enough impression on us that her competitors were fighting a losing battle. We stopped by the office again on our way to pick the kids up from school so that we could sign the necessary papers and pay the necessary fees to get the ball (slowly) rolling.

We haven't had a whole lot of time to figure out exactly how we want to broach this subject with the kids. All we do know is that it's one of those conversations we need to be well prepared for. It's going to be confusing enough for them without us half-assing it. Unfortunately, between them doing their homework, and me making dinner, and Tommy shuttling Penny and Asta back and forth to their respective dance classes, we barely get the chance to see one another again until dinner.

It's not until after dinner, when the kids are all preoccupied with various video games, tv shows and toys that we find a moment alone together. Even though there's really no chance of them hearing us from two rooms away, it's still always a good idea to keep our voices down when we're discussing things we don't want them to overhear. But doing so always makes me feel entirely deceptive and guilty.

"I guess the main thing we have to decide is if we're asking them or telling them." Tommy sums up as he hands me another glass to dry.

"We're telling them." I reply automatically before immediately second guessing myself. "Right?"

"I don't know. It feels weird either way, you know? Like, it's a huge decision and it's not like it's not gonna impact them at all. But most parents don't consult their kids before deciding to reproduce."

"I know. I never did before."

"Maybe we should just tell them that this is something we're thinking about doing, and ask them how they feel about it? It doesn't mean we're giving them a choice or whatever, but at least they can feel like we included them in the decision."

"Even if the decision is already made?" I remark playfully. "How much detail should we go into? We can't just tell them we're thinking about having a baby and expect them not to ask how. And I'm not sure the 'how' is something they can wrap their heads around. I mean, Ezra is old enough to understand it, for the most part. And Penny might be able to. But River and Viggo probably aren't going to get it. All they know is that babies grow inside a mommy's tummy. And they don't have a mom anymore."

"Well... we can just say that..." He pauses for a moment, idly scrubbing at a roasting pan while he stares out of the window over the sink and tries to find the right words. "The doctor is going to make a baby outside of someone's tummy. And then... they're going to put the baby inside the tummy of a really nice woman, and she's going to take care of it for us until it's ready to be born."

God, I love him. "You're adorable."

"Fuck you." He scowls at me, splashing soapy water in my general direction.

"You should write surrogacy books for kids."

"And you should shut the fuck up."

I manage to side step just before he has a chance to rub his wet hands all over my face, but that doesn't deter him from chasing me around the kitchen island. Every time he passes the sink, he dunks his hands back in. And every time he dunks his hands in, he leaves a trail of dishwater all over the
hardwood floor. No matter how hard I try to dodge every puddle in my efforts to evade him, I'm too much of a klutz to avoid slipping on the wet floor and falling on my ass. He's kneeling at my side within seconds, apologizing profusely and asking me if I'm hurt, but I'm laughing so hard that I can't speak. I guess that's all the answer he needs, though. As soon as he realizes that I'm fine, his hands are on my face and I'm begging him to stop.

I'm not sure if it was the loud thud I made when I fell over or the sound of me crying out for mercy, but it's not long before the kids and Duke are standing over us, watching me squirm around on the floor while Tommy practically holds me down by my head! Duke jumps right in, licking any part of my face his tongue can get to between Tommy's fingers, leaving me thrashing around in a futile effort to make them both get the hell off of me!

"What happened?" Asks Ezra in obvious amusement, gazing down at us curiously with a very concerned and confused Asta in his arms. "Did you guys fall or something?"

"Make it stop!" Is the only response I'm capable of, and the only response I receive is a lot of unhelpful giggling.

"I'll save you!" Viggo declares valiantly.

The next thing I know he's pounced onto Tommy's back, causing Tommy to almost collapse on top of me. Of course River wastes no time joining in, but it's impossible to tell whose side either of them are actually on. We're a heap of tangled, flailing limbs on the kitchen floor for the longest time, and I honestly cannot remember the last time I laughed this hard or felt this good.

I'm not sure if that makes this the best or worst time to break our news to them, all I know is that there's never going to be a perfect time. There'll always be a reason to put it off a little longer.

Tonight that reason is the heartfelt smile on my oldest son's face.

And the undeniable fear I have of once again being the reason that it's no longer there.
We chickened out.

Or maybe it was just me who chickened out.

But Tommy let me!

Everything felt so great last night. Everyone was happy, no one was crying, or whining, or tattling on anyone else. We were laughing, and playing, and enjoying each other's company. After Tommy finally relented and helped me up off of the kitchen floor (and after I'd washed my face), we all gathered together in the family room to watch some TV. It wasn't really any different from most other nights, but I was acutely aware of every detail of it anyway. I didn't pay attention to the TV at all because I was too focused on the weight of Asta's slumbering body sprawled across my lap, and mesmerized by the way Penny twirled her long, blonde hair around her fingers as she sat with her head resting on Tommy's shoulder. River and Viggo were like mirror images of one another as they lay on their stomachs on the rug in front of us, idly kicking their legs back and forth in the air. And Ezra curled up in an armchair with Duke, his fingers combing through his fur as he slept.

I thought back to our consultation with Alyssa that morning, and I remembered telling her how we felt that having another baby would make our family feel more complete.

Tommy was right when he said that it feels complete right now.

It's hard to fathom how things could be any better than they already are. In fact, it's kind of scary to think about changing anything, rocking the boat, altering the status quo. It took a long time and a lot of tears and struggle for us to get to this place of calm contentment.

It's not like I'm having second thoughts. I would never do that to Tommy, and I do want to have a baby with him. The idea of it, of a brand new little person with his eyes, or nose, or smile makes my heart skip a beat. I'm in love with the idea.

And I'm also terrified of the idea of messing with the incredible family we already have.

"Hey!" Tommy calls out to me as I hear the front door close behind him. "Sorry that took so fucking
long. Traffic sucked."

"It's okay, I only just got back." I tell him, settling myself in a chair at the dining table with my third (okay, fifth) coffee of the morning. "You ready?"

"I've been ready since we got the email last night." He smirks as he takes a seat beside me and opens the lid of my MacBook. "You were the one who said we should wait until this morning."

"I just didn't want us starting something we'd be too tired to finish."

"Well, I'm wide awake right now. And I'm assuming you're fully caffeinated."

"Getting there." I smile, taking another sip of my coffee. "What do you wanna do first? Fill out the profile for the surrogate match or look through the egg donor database?"

"I guess we should do the profile first. We've got all weekend to look through the database, but if we don't get the profile back to Alyssa today, she's not gonna be able to start looking for a match on Monday."

"Actually it'll be Tuesday, since Monday is a holiday."

"Shit." He sighs dejectedly, double clicking on the attached fillable PDF file she sent us. "Even more reason to get it done today."

"But even if we don't, it's not the end of the world. In the grand scheme of things it's just one extra day. This whole thing is going to take months."

"Which is why we should get all this paperwork bullshit over with as soon as we can. The only thing standing between us and a surrogate match right now is us. I don't know about you, but I'm sick of getting in my own fucking way."

I feel like I should tell him to slow down, but I doubt he'd listen to me. It'd probably just piss him off or make him paranoid about me not wanting this as much as he does, and I don't want either of those things. I don't blame him for wanting to get this part over with, it feels like another hoop we have to jump through to get to what we want. But in reality, it's one of the more important parts of this whole process. What we put in this profile will determine who they match us with for a surrogate. If we don't take our time to be as specific about our preferences as we can, it'll only take us longer to meet someone we actually feel comfortable working with.

"Okay, why don't I read the questions and we can figure out the answers together?" I suggest, pulling the Mac Book closer to me. "I type faster than you."

In reality, I just want to be in control of what we type, not how fast we type it.

The first couple of pages are simple enough to get through. It's mostly questions about our interests and other less critical aspects of our lives. It's not until we get to the part of the profile where we're asked to describe our relationship, how we met, how long we've been together, our families, our religious beliefs, our political views, that we really have to stop and think about each question before we answer it. We want to be as detailed and honest as possible without writing an entire novel. It ends up taking us a total of three hours to complete it, we don't even stop for lunch until it's done. In fact, we end up eating lunch while reading it over one last time before attaching it to a reply email and sending it off to Alyssa.

Tommy wants to jump straight into searching for an egg donor as soon as we've finished eating, but I feel as though my brain is already fried from filling out the profile. I cannot look at this computer
screen for another second. When I close the lid of my MacBook he automatically starts complaining and asking me what I'm doing. Rather than trying to explain myself, I attempt to silence him with a kiss.

He's not so easily distracted, though.

"Dude, we're in the middle of something kinda important." He protests instead of kissing me back, so I relocate my lips to his neck instead. "I thought we were gonna start looking at egg donors before we have to go pick the kids up."

"I changed my mind." I sigh against his skin. "Like you said, we've got all weekend for that."

"But-"

"In case you hadn't noticed, I'm trying to get your attention here." I point out to him with feigned impatience, my hand creeping seductively along his thigh while he watches it in anticipation. "Focus, please."

He groans softly, pulling his lower lip between his teeth as his eyes momentarily flutter closed. "You don't fight fair."

"You left me no choice."

"My bad..." He murmurs almost mindlessly, squirming in his seat as my hand inches closer to the zipper of his jeans.

"Know what we haven't done in w-a-y too long?" I ask, my fingers coming to a slow stop just like my kisses, leaving him whining pathetically.

"Jerked me off?"

"Taken a bath together." I smile smugly at the sound of him practically purring in approval. "It'll help you relax."

"So would jerking me off." He notes as I start to get up from the table.

"Come take a bath with me, and we'll see what we can do about that..."

"Sold."

Rather than it being a race, or a groping, uncoordinated fumble all the way to our bathroom, we take our time. Tommy grabs a half empty bottle of red wine from the kitchen while I run the bath, and it's ready and waiting for us just as we finish undressing. The whole point of this wasn't just to distract him, it was to get him to slow down. And now that we're actually submerged beneath the perfectly warm water, I want more than ever for this to last as long as possible. We have just over two hours before we have to leave to pick the kids up from school, and I intend to make the most of every minute.

"Why don't we do this more often?" He asks, tipping the bottle of wine to his lips and taking a sip, his body resting comfortably against mine.

"Because we never usually have time."

"Maybe we just never make time."

"Maybe." I agree, accepting the bottle from him and drinking from it. "Maybe that needs to change."
"It definitely needs to change." He sighs contentedly as his fingers trail lazily up and down my thighs underneath the water. "We should do this at least once a week."

I laugh softly, pressing my lips to his temple and feeling him lean into me even more. "That might be asking too much. Especially once this new baby comes along."

"We should try, at least."

"We can do that." I agree in spite of all evidence to the contrary that I've gathered over the years.

Maybe all that evidence is invalid because all of my past experience came from having children with someone I wasn't desperately in love with. I didn't go above and beyond to make an effort to spend time alone with Natalie, I was happy to let each newborn baby dictate our lives if it meant that she was too preoccupied to care how frequently we had sex. But with Tommy, I have absolutely no desire to let our relationship take a backseat to taking care of a new baby. I know our priorities will have to shift, but that doesn't mean we have to become less important to each other. I've seen too many people I know do that to their relationships; they become parents and forget that they are still people. They let their marriages fall by the wayside, they become "mom and dad" and no longer see each other as anything else. Eventually the only thing they have in common is their kids.

I don't believe that's the way it has to be.

And I hope like hell that going into this knowing that I don't want to let that happen to us will help me be aware enough of it to prevent it.

"I don't ever want this to change." I whisper against his ear, wrapping my arms possessively around his bare chest in a hopeless attempt to hold on to the way things are between us in this moment. "Promise me you'll never see me as the father of your kids before you see me as the guy you fell in love with."

"What do you mean?" He frowns as he tilts his head back slightly to try to see the expression on my face.

"I mean... what we have has changed since I moved here, because we had to figure out how to be parents and be a couple. But we've never neglected us, you know? We put the kids first, we have to, but we always put each other an incredibly close second. We don't let everything else get in the way until we can't even really see each other the way we used to. Until we stop having shower sex in the mornings, or going out on dates every week, or taking baths together on Friday afternoons."

He wordlessly takes my left hand in his right, splaying my fingers out with his own and pressing our damp palms together for a second before allowing his fingers to slide between mine and clasp my hand tightly.

"I promise I will never not notice how insanely fuckable you are." He tells me, looking up at me with a self-satisfied grin. "How's that?"

"I'll take it." I chuckle quietly, turning his face towards mine and kissing him softly.

I hadn't really intended for the kiss to last longer than a moment or two, or for it to intensify in any way. But as so often tends to be the case with the two of us, that's exactly what happens. My body reacts instinctively to his faint moans and the sensation of his fingers clutching at my forearm. I can feel how much he wants me, how much he needs me, and there's nothing I want more than to give in to him.

His hand is still holding onto my arm as my fingers glide down the length of his neck and along the
gentle slope of his collarbone. I feel his breath catch in his throat for a moment when my hand begins to journey lower across his chest, and his body presses even more closely against mine beneath the gently lapping water surrounding us. The closer my fingers get to his crotch, the more impatient he becomes. His hand is no longer simply wrapped around my wrist, it's pushing it down at the same time as his hips are rising to meet my touch.

The second I close my fingers around him, his head falls back against my shoulder, exposing his neck to me. And I waste no time taking full advantage of that gift, my lips caressing the soft skin and coarse stubble of his throat as my hand caresses the smooth, slick skin of his erection. My movements remain slow, at first, despite how badly I want to get him off. The slower I go, the more desperate he gets. And when he gets desperate, I get to hear him whining, and moaning, and pleading with me.

It *never* gets old.

But once again, he's in no mood to wait. His hand closes over mine, guiding each move it makes, forcing me to stroke him a little faster and squeeze just a little harder. And the more worked up he becomes, the more intuitive my actions become, until I barely have to even think about what I'm doing and I can devote my complete attention to the expression on his face, the rapid rise and fall of his chest, and the indescribable sounds drifting from between his lips with every erratic breath he takes.

*Fuck.*

I don't *ever* want this to change.

I unintentionally murmur an "I love you" against his ear, it comes out of me as naturally as the breath I exhale it on, and it pushes him over the edge. His body tenses for a moment before going limp against mine, and I hold him close as though he might slip helplessly beneath the water if I don't. It *feels* as though he needs me that much. I wait for him to catch his breath before reaching for a nearby washcloth, soaking it in the bath water for a moment before using it to carefully wipe off his stomach and chest.

And the whole time, his fingers stay curled around my hand. His grip is nowhere near as tight as it was, but he still refuses to let go entirely.

He offers to reciprocate, but I don't want him to. He pouts and complains about it a little, and I simply shake my head at him and assure him that I'm already more than satisfied. All I want to do right now is just *be* with him. When the bath water gets cold, we dry off and relocate to our bed and spend the next hour or so drifting in and out of brief moments of sleep. Usually when we get time alone together like this, it disappears in the blink of an eye. But for some reason this afternoon *isn't* passing us by in a blur.

It's almost as though the universe knew how much we needed it and decided to give us a break.

Despite how unhurried everything has been, it still feels like the time for us to get up and get dressed so that we're not late picking the kids up comes too soon. But when I make a move to pull back the sheets, he stops me.

"I got it." He tells me before I have a chance to ask him what he's doing. "You stay here."

"But-"

"You've barely been in the studio all week."
Oh, right.

I've been so focused on all this baby stuff, I kinda forgot that I still have a career to worry about.

"I can do that... later." Who knows when, but I'm sure I'll find time. Somehow. "I don't want you to have to go by the school and Asta's pre-school. It's Friday afternoon; traffic is gonna be a total nightmare."

"I can deal." He assures me, pecking me on the lips and climbing out of bed. "But if you don't get the demo for that song you guys were working on finished before tomorrow, Ike's gonna be pissed at you."

"I'm used to Ike being pissed at me." I smirk as I watch him grab some underwear out of the dresser. "It's how we relate to each other."

"Stop making excuses and being so goddamn lazy." He orders before grabbing my clothes off of the floor by the bathroom door and throwing them at me. "Slacker."

"But my wrist is tired!"

His only response is to throw a dirty sock at my head before disappearing into the bathroom, leaving me sprawled out across our bed, tangled in our sheets, striving to hold on to the last of the warmth he left behind him. And unable to wipe the grin off of my face.

Once Tommy has left to pick up the kids from school, I head down to the studio to set up and start working on recording some basic keyboards and vocals for the track Ike, Zac and I were writing last week. It took us several lengthy skype sessions over the course of several afternoons and evenings, but we finally got the lyrics worked out, and now I just need to put those lyrics to some actual music so it can join the other dozen or so songs we've written as a possible contender for the new album. Once the kids are on summer break from school next month, we're all headed out to Tulsa so that I can actually get into the studio with my brothers and try to record final versions of the songs that wind up making the cut.

But when I sit down with my notepad and start to read over the lyrics to re-familiarize myself with the song, I find it hard to focus. It's not that I don't like the song, I just don't want to work on it right now. Instead, I pick up my acoustic guitar and slowly begin to strum. As much as I like to stay focused and get my work done, sometimes inspiration for one song strikes you while you're trying to write or record another. I've learned over the years that if you listen to it and let it take you wherever it needs to go, you often end up with something really special.

And that's definitely the feeling I'm getting right now.

As always tends to happen when I shut myself away in the studio, I lose all track of time. One minute it's two o'clock in the afternoon, and the next time I look at the clock it's somehow almost six o'clock in the evening. I'm sure Tommy would tell me to stay down here until I'm done, but I'd rather have dinner with my family. Besides, now that I'm aware of the time and thinking about dinner, I'm hungry. I can't concentrate on songwriting if my stomach is growling!

I make my way upstairs, fully prepared to get right to work in the kitchen, but before I even get there I can smell food and hear lively chatter coming from the dining room. They're all so busy passing pizza boxes and milk cartons back and forth across the table that they don't even notice my presence at first, which provides me with the perfect opportunity to take it all in. Ezra is picking the mushrooms off of his slices and River is stealing them off of his plate to put on his own pizza. Penny is helping Asta pour some milk into her cup, despite Asta's insistence that she can do it herself (she
can't). And Tommy is trying to convince Viggo that he only needs to take one slice of pizza at a time, and that there will be plenty left over if he wants more when he's done. Because he knows that Viggo won't finish slice number one before moving on to slice number two; we've been trying to break him out of that wasteful habit for nearly three years!

It's as though my hunger vanishes in an instant and is replaced by the strongest desire to go back down to the studio and keep writing. It's inspiration overload, and I could never explain how lucky I feel to have this in my life. Every. single. day.

"Hey!" Tommy smiles at me, oblivious to Viggo swiping a second slice of pizza the moment he turns his back. "Shoulda known you'd be able to smell food from all the way down there."

"Very funny."

"Did you get the demo finished?"

"Uh..." I smile sheepishly as I approach the table and take a seat beside Asta. "I got a demo almost finished."

He shakes his head at me, rolling his eyes and opening his beer. "You're gonna be in so much trouble."

"Why're you gonna be in trouble?" Asks River with curious concern. "What did you do?"

"It's not what he did, it's what he didn't do." Tommy replies teasingly.

"You know what? You're worse than Ike." I shoot back as I nab one of Ezra's discarded mushroom slices and throw it across the table at Tommy, who is too busy gaping at me in outrage to see it coming, let alone try to dodge it. "I'll finish the demo later. I just had another idea this afternoon and I didn't wanna ignore it and forget it."

"Daddy, can I go to a slumber party at Kelly's house tomorrow night?" Penny pleads, all but batting her eye lashes at me. "All my friends are going."

"Which one is Kelly again?"

She heaves a deep sigh, as though my inability to remember details about all of her friends is some kind of sin. But before she can start listing off a bunch of pointless information about this kid that will in no way help me put a face to her name, Tommy interjects.

"We ran into her and her mom at Parent-Teacher Night last month." He explains, giving me a very telling look. "Her mom was... friendly."

"Oh... right." I remember now. That woman wouldn't stop touching me on the arm and flipping her hair around like she was in a Pantene commercial. "Um... I guess you can go. And if you ask him nicely, I bet Tommy will drive you."

"Wuss."

"Hey, if you don't wanna do it, I'll go. Maybe Kelly's mom will invite me to stay for dinner." I shrug nonchalantly, pretending not to see Tommy's glare as I reach for a slice of pizza. "I'm sure she'd like some adult company if a bunch of ten year old girls are taking over her house for the night."
"You can't stay for dinner!" Penny practically squeaks. "That's so embarrassing! No one else's dad is going to stay for dinner!"

"Yeah, Taylor." Mocks Tommy with a smug smile. "You're so embarrassing."

"I feel so unloved."

"I love you, daddy!" Viggo chimes in, flashing me a gap toothed grin. "Do you feel better now?"

"Much. Thanks, buddy."

The kids quickly go back to the conversations (and arguments) that they were engrossed in when I came to the table, while Tommy and I do what we usually do: we eat our meals and try to keep up with everything that's being said, cutting in to settle disagreements when necessary. And every so often we'll catch each other's eye across the table, and we'll share a smile, or an eye roll, or some other silent commentary on the chatter going on around us.

It would be easy to let this evening be like every other Friday evening for us. To let the kids take their plates into the kitchen and then go into the movie room and bicker over which movie we should watch. To let them go to bed, kiss them goodnight, and collapse in an exhausted heap with Tommy. It would be simpler.

But it would feel wrong.

I don't want to start another day with our kids in the dark about the life altering plans we've been making all week. So when they start to get up from the table to clear their dishes, I force myself to speak up.

"Before you guys go pick out a movie... there's something important that Tommy and I wanted to talk to you about."

Tommy freezes in the middle of standing from his seat, staring across the table at me in surprise for a moment before mouthing, "now?" I nod as confidently as I can, taking a deep breath as everyone else sits back down and looks to me expectantly.

And now I can't remember anything I wanted to say.
I can feel them all watching me, six pairs of eyes on me, waiting for me to say whatever it is I've asked them to stay seated to hear. But all that's coming to mind right now is all of the things that Tommy and I agreed we didn't want to say. You'd think that would at least narrow it down and give me a rough idea of how to start.

But you'd be wrong.

"Are we in trouble?" Viggo curiously inquires.

"I didn't do it!" River exclaims in his own defense, even though he hasn't been accused of anything. "Why do you always think it's my fault?"

Shit. "Calm down, Riv. We know you didn't do anything wrong."

"No one's in trouble." Adds Tommy. "It's not a bad thing-"

"I want ice cream." Asta announces, already bored of this conversation. If it can even be considered a conversation at this stage.

"Uh... you know what, kiddo, why don't you go play in the other room for a minute?"

"Then I have ice cream?" She asks Tommy hopefully, knowing that the odds of him ever telling her 'no' when she's done nothing wrong are slim to none.

He nods as I help her off of her chair. "Then you can have ice cream."

"How come she gets to go and play but we have to stay here?" Whines River, pouting while he watches his little sister practically skip off into the family room. "She never has to do anything."

"She's such a baby!" Viggo concurs before River has even finished making his complaint.

"Yeah, well, when you were her age you were 'such a baby', too." I point out to him with a small smile. "It's one of the perks of the job."
"But she's almost big!" He protests adamantly. "She doesn't even wear a diaper!"

"I know, but she's still not big enough to talk about stuff with us like you guys do."

"So what do you wanna talk to us about?" Asks Penny somewhat anxiously, more than old enough to know when something significant is lurking on the horizon. "Are we still going to Tulsa this summer?"

"Yeah, of course we are!" I quickly assure her.

"Is one of you gonna go away somewhere?" River guesses, looking back and forth between me and Tommy. "For a long time?"

"No, no one is going anywhere." Tommy promises him wholeheartedly. "Not until your dad has to go on tour in the fall."

"What we want to talk to you about is... something that we've been thinking about a lot lately." I begin as confidently as I can, trying my best to sound positive so that maybe they'll receive our news with equal enthusiasm. "You guys just pointed out that Asta is barely even a baby anymore. And so we've been thinking that, now you guys are all so grown up and so great at taking care of each other, it might be a good time to have another baby in the family."

The expressions on their faces range from bewildered to disgusted. I pretty much expected that Viggo wouldn't be thrilled at the idea of having yet another younger child around. As much as he wants to be treated just like Ezra and River when it comes to the movies he's allowed to watch, or what time he goes to bed, or what games he can play, the rest of the time he still likes to be treated like one of the babies of the family. River loves Asta, but he's constantly complaining about her getting her own way all the time and never having to do any chores. The thought of having to deal with another little pair of grabby hands taking his stuff probably doesn't appeal to him very much. Penny is the caregiver of the family. She adores babies, and so I can only assume that the uncertain look in her eyes is a result of not understanding how we plan to have a baby when neither of us is physically capable of carrying one.

And Ezra... I can't read him at all right now.

It's terrifying.

"Why'd you wanna have another baby?" Viggo finally pipes up. "I already have way more brothers and sisters than all my friends-"

"There's no room in the car for anyone else!" Argues River indignantly, interrupting his little brother to voice his own protests. "I get squished all the time."

"We can get a bigger car." Tommy contends, trying to keep his tone calm and casual, like their response to this news doesn't have the potential to crush him completely. "It's not a big deal."

"Penny, what do you think?"

She shrugs somewhat uncomfortably, averting her eyes to the pizza crusts on her dinner plate as she mumbles her response. "I don't get it, I guess."

"You don't get what, sweetheart?"

"How are you gonna have a baby? Are you gonna adopt someone else's baby?"
I take a breath, trying to prepare myself for the confusion that's still to come. "No, we're not going to adopt a baby."

"But... you're both boys. And boys can't have babies, only girls can-"

"Yeah!" River cuts Penny off suddenly. "You can't have a baby 'cause you're boys!"

"You're right, we can't have a baby. But there are special doctors who can help us to make a baby. And then the baby would grow in the tummy of a woman who wants to help us have a baby." Tommy tries to explain as simply as possible. "So... she'd kinda be taking care of the baby for us until it's ready to be born."

"Will she be the baby's mom?" Questions Penny, her frown deepening more and more by the second.

"No, she won't be its mom."

"Who will be the mommy?" Viggo presses insistently. "Will the baby have a different mommy than me?"

"Yeah, it will." I tell him almost sadly, wishing that this wasn't so complex for him and so disappointing for his older siblings. "The baby can't have the same mommy as you, because your mommy is in heaven, remember?"

"Who will be the baby's mommy then?" Asks River.

"Well... we don't know yet." Replies Tommy awkwardly.

"Will you be the daddy?" Viggo asks me with an inquisitive tilt of his head. "Like you're my daddy? Or will it be another daddy like it's another mommy?"

"Actually..." I glance at Tommy, offering him a supportive smile before turning my attention back to the kids. "Tommy is going to be the baby's dad."

Penny seems to consider this information for a while, pondering it silently as she puts the pieces together in her head. And the frown on her face only grows when those pieces don't seem to fit. "But... if the baby doesn't have the same mom as we do, and you're not gonna be the dad... then that means it won't be our brother or sister."

"Just because you won't have the exact same parents, that doesn't mean you won't be family. Tommy is your family; he's your dad, just like I am. So the baby is going to be a brother or sister to you, the same way that Bridget is just like a cousin to you. Does that make sense?"

"I guess..."

"Do you have to have another baby?" River sighs disapprovingly, making it sound as though this entire process is going to be so inconvenient for him. "I don't want another baby, I like things how they are now."

I can sense Tommy's sadness without even having to see his face. We didn't do this to ask for their permission, and their opinions don't necessarily have to alter our plans. But that doesn't mean that their lack of excitement doesn't put a damper on things. It would have been nice if they could have all responded with nothing but joy over the prospect of welcoming another sibling into the family, but I think we both knew that wasn't realistic.
I'm not sure that either of us was prepared for all of them to react so negatively, though.

Before either Tommy or I can respond to River's complaint, Asta comes marching back into the dining room with her hands on her hips. She stops right beside Tommy's chair, fixing him with her most no-nonsense look. For such a little girl, she has a whole lot of attitude. I always tell Tommy that she gets her brazen side from him.

"Dad, I played for a long, long time. Now I have ice cream?"

"Yeah, Brat Attack." He sighs, trying his hardest to smile for her as he gets out of his seat and scoops her up into his arms. "Now you can have ice cream."

I wait until they're out of the room before turning back to the four quiet, grumpy souls that are still sitting around the table with me. I don't know what to say to them right now. I can't force them to be happy about this, or command them to be okay with the idea. I can try to convince them that everything is going to be alright, but if they don't believe me I'm just going to have to live with that.

"Guys, I know this is a big change for all of us. But change isn't a bad thing. Moving out here was a big change, but it was a good change. And Tommy moving in with us was a big change, too. But I bet none of you wish he hadn't, right?"

"No!" Viggo instantly replies, his assertion echoed with equal veracity by River and his eyes wide with horror at the very notion that any one of us wouldn't want Tommy around. "I love Tommy!"

"I know you do, buddy. And he loves you guys. And I bet you're all gonna love this new baby, too."

"So you're gonna have it no matter what we say?" Ezra asks, breaking the silence he'd been maintaining since I asked them all to sit back down so that I could make this announcement.

How am I supposed to answer that? I don't want him, or any of them, to think that how they feel is of no consequence to either of us. Nothing could be further from the truth. But I also don't want him to think that this conversation is in some way an informal vote. I can't take this away from Tommy, not now. I don't want to.

But I also don't want to be insensitive to their very valid feelings.

"It's not that..." I sigh dejectedly, struggling to find a way to assure them that what they want is important to us while simultaneously making it clear that this isn't a decision they get to help us make. "We love you guys, you know that. Just like I hope you know that we would never do anything that we thought would be bad for this family, or that would make you unhappy. You might not think this is a great idea right now, but I really believe that everything is gonna be okay. I know you're going to love this little baby just as much as you love each other, and I really don't think that anything bad can come from us bringing even more love into our family."

It's not like I was expecting them to all instantly change their minds or anything, but something a little more encouraging than nothing would have been nice. Maybe they just need some time to let all of this sink in. Maybe once they've gotten used to the idea of having a new brother or sister, they'll warm up to it.

Or maybe I'm just going to have to do what I think is best, regardless of what they say they want. Just like every other parent on the planet does.

The rest of the evening plays out like most Friday evenings tend to for us, but the mood is definitely not as laid-back and cheerful as it usually is at the beginning of the weekend. We head into the movie room to eat our ice cream and watch 'Big Hero 6', but it's pretty obvious no one is interested. Asta is
drifting in and out of sleep, and everyone else is... elsewhere. No one laughs when something funny happens, or gasps when something surprising happens. They're all staring at the screen, but no one is paying attention.

And no one complains when I tell them it's time to get ready for bed, either, which is really disturbing!

It's hard not to feel guilty. But I'm determined to try, because I'm pretty sure that's what they want. They're sulking in an attempt to make us see how miserable this whole 'new baby' thing is going to make them all. They're hoping that it'll make us change our minds, the way it sometimes does when they pout over having to leave the beach before they're ready, or when we tell them they can't have a second helping of dessert. But this isn't some small thing that they can puppy eye us into reconsidering. And as much as it sucks to see them looking so sad, it's not a good enough reason to give in. They can't always get what they want, and they need to accept that.

That's what I'm going to keep telling myself anyway.

With Asta, Viggo, River and Penny tucked in, I stick my head into Ezra's bedroom just long enough to tell him that he has another half an hour until it's time to turn his light out. Usually he'll tell me "okay", or at least nod, but tonight I get no response. Just as I begin to pull the door closed behind me, I hear him quietly call me back. I can't define the feelings swirling in my chest right now. I never thought that hope and dread could cause such similar sensations.

"What's up?"

He looks down at his sheets, appearing almost embarrassed as I slowly approach his bed and take a seat on the edge. "Is it happening again?"

"Is what happening again?" I ask him worriedly, placing a comforting hand on his shoulder.

"The same thing that happened with mom." He clarifies in a near mumble. "You said once that mom wanted to have more babies because you didn't love her enough-"

"Ezra-"

"Do you not love Tommy anymore?" He questions a little more boldly than before. "Are you gonna start going away on tour all the time like you used to?"

"No." I promise him earnestly. "Ez, I swear that's not what's going on. This isn't the same as what happened with me and your mom at all. Tommy and I don't wanna have this baby because there's something missing in our relationship, or because I'm not making him happy enough, or paying him enough attention and he wants something to make him feel better."

"Then why do you have to have another baby?"

"We don't have to. But... we want to. And it's not because you guys aren't enough for us-"

"But if we were enough, you wouldn't want to have another baby." He argues very reasonably. "So why do you want to?"

How am I supposed to explain this? Nothing I say is going to convince him that he and his brothers and sisters aren't somehow inadequate. His argument is completely valid; if they're enough, we don't need to have a baby. And yet, even though it makes complete sense, it's also entirely untrue! There is nothing lacking in our lives. We don't need to have another baby, but... we still want one.
"I know it's hard to understand, but I promise you that we don't want to have another baby because we're unhappy, or because you guys aren't enough. It's not like that."

"Then what is it like?"

"Well... okay, this is gonna sound really stupid, but you know how whenever we go to a party, Viggo always wants to have one more cupcake? Even though he already had three and he doesn't need another one? But they're really good, and even though he's full, he still really wants one more."

"Yeah, and then he always ends up feeling like he's gonna puke, and you always tell him that next time he should stop before he gets too full."

Ugh. This was a bad analogy. "Not every time."

"I just don't get it." He sighs despondently. "Everyone was happy already."

"I know. And I know you guys aren't happy about this idea right now, but I honestly believe this is going to be a really great thing for all of us. Tommy and I wouldn't do it if we thought it would make you guys unhappy or make anything harder on you."

After giving my words a moment of thought, he nods faintly. But even though I'm pretty sure he believes that I believe everything I've just said, I'm not so sure he was convinced by any of it. I know nothing else I say right now is likely to make any difference to how he's feeling, and I understand that completely, whether he thinks I do or not. I know he's been through way too much these last few years, and his life was finally back on track again. He's happy, he has friends, he's doing great in school, and he's comfortable at home. Our relationship is stable, he trusts me, and that means so much to me. I don't want to put all of that at risk, I would never want to take any of it from him. And I don't believe that I am, I wouldn't even be considering this if I thought for a second that it would hurt any of my kids. But I don't know how to make him see that.

All I can do is be as sensitive to his feelings as possible and hope that eventually he'll see that I'm right.

God, I hope I'm right.

I head back to the movie room to see if Tommy returned there after saying goodnight to the kids, but I get there to find that the projector and all of the lights are off. There's no sign of him in the family room, either, but the kitchen light is still on so I make my way in there. The sight of him sitting on the floor with his back to the cabinets causes me to stop in my tracks as soon as I set foot in the room. Duke is lying beside him, giving me the same pitiful puppy eyes that the kids have been giving me all evening. If I didn't already have some idea of how Tommy was feeling, Duke's sad brown eyes would be a dead giveaway. Sometimes I swear that Duke channels people's emotions and adopts them as his own.

"You broke the dog." I attempt to tease him gently. "You know you can't have feelings when he's in the room."

"Kinda hard to avoid it when a six year old asks you why you don't love him anymore."

"Seriously?"

He nods miserably, giving Duke a commiserative pat on the head as he takes a sip of his beer. "I tried to tell him that we don't want to have another baby because we don't love him anymore, but since I did a shit job of explaining why we actually want another baby, I'm not sure he bought it."
"I had pretty much the same conversation with Ezra." I sigh wearily as I sink down against the cabinets beside him. "He didn't say we don't love him anymore, but he was worried that I don't love you anymore, or that they're not enough to make us happy."

"Fuck."

"Yeah."

"I'm sorry. I totally shoulda seen that coming after everything that happened before."

"I think I kinda did, I was just hoping I was wrong." I admit quietly, taking the bottle out of his hands and raising it to my lips. "I'm wrong a lot, so I figured there was a good chance I might be this time."

"I just... I can't believe they all hate the idea. I thought that at least Penny would be excited about having another baby around, you know?"

"Yeah, I know." I offer him a small smile, wrapping my arm around his shoulders and drawing him nearer. "I thought so, too."

"Do you think we're being selfish?" He asks despondently. "Like... maybe we should just be happy with what we have and forget this whole surrogacy thing."

"Everyone who wants to have a kid is selfish, whether they already have one or not. They're not doing it for anyone but themselves." I remark in my most rational tone. I'm not sure if I'm trying to convince him or myself, but hopefully I'll succeed with at least one of us. "No one goes into it thinking 'I must reproduce for the future of mankind!' Except maybe the Duggars."

"Well, fuck. Why'd you have to bring them into it?"

"Sorry, I forgot how terrified you are of them." I chuckle softly, pressing my lips to his forehead. "I don't wanna give you nightmares."

"Can we can watch 'The Exorcist' before we go to bed so I'll sleep better?"

"You're such a freak."

"So maybe we shouldn't be passing my freak genes on to another generation." He points out semi-seriously. "You have better DNA than I do; we already know you produce good kids. What if my spawn comes out all psychotic and chainsaw massacre-y."

I pretend to give his concern some genuine consideration before taking a long, deep breath and presenting him with my solemn response. "It doesn't matter if this baby grows up to be the next President of the United States or the next Manson-"

"Charles or Marilyn?"

"Does it matter?"

He glares at me scathingly, snatching his beer out of my hand and attempting to shrug my arm off of his shoulders. "I want a divorce."

"No you don't."

"Well I at least want a blow job."
"That you can have." I grin while he continues to scowl at me disapprovingly. "Seriously, though-"

"What do you mean, 'seriously, though'? I am fucking serious! If you're gonna insult one of my favorite artists, you can quite literally suck my dick!"

"And I will, gladly. But not until I'm done telling you that I don't care if it turns out that you do produce a baby with serial killer tendencies. I don't care if you produce a baby with two heads, or no head, or hair like Donald Trump." He almost spits his mouthful of beer all over the floor as he covers his mouth to try to contain his laughter. "I'm gonna love this kid no matter what, because it's yours."

"I can get on board with it being the next Dexter Morgan, but if it looks anything like Donald Trump I'm gonna disown it faster than you can say 'you're fired!'".

He's so full of shit, and he knows it. "Whatever you say, baby."

"So... if we're joking and shit, does that mean we're still gonna do this?" He asks, suddenly a lot less light hearted than he was before. "Even though the kids all hate the idea?"

"Of course we are... aren't we?"

"Well... I mean... I know I want to, but-"

"That's it, then." I cut him off adamantly, holding his skeptical stare. "I meant what I said when I told them that having this baby was only going to bring more love into our family. It's going to make things better than they already are, even if they can't see that right now."

"Are you sure?"

Mostly.

"Completely."
What the fuck was I thinking?
"Give it back!"
Who the fuck needs six kids?
"No!"
Who the fuck needs five kids?!
"Tommmmy!"
Jesus fucking Christ! "What now?!"

Asta comes running into the kitchen at full speed (or her version of it, anyway), wielding River's giant, plastic Thor hammer.

"Dad!" She squeals, clutching the stolen toy in both hands as she scurries to hide behind my legs. "He's gonna hit me!"

"She took my hammer!" River accuses the second he sets foot into the room, his hands clenched into fists at his sides. "Make her give it back!"

"You weren't playing with it!" Comes her defiant response, even as she grasps at the leg of my jeans
in fear. "I wanna be Thor!"

"That's stupid! You can't be Thor. You're a girl and Thor is a boy!"

"I can so be Thor!" She all but screams in retaliation, stomping her foot on the floor. "Girls can be same as boys can be!"

Fuck yeah! That's my girl!

"Fine! Be a dumb girly Thor, just give me my hammer back!"

"No!"

"Tommy!"

I hate my own name right now.

"Dude, were you playing with the hammer?"

River's mouth falls open in outrage. "It's mine!"

"But if you weren't playing with it, does it really matter if your sister plays with it for a-"

"Yes!"

"Why?" I sigh wearily, reaching down and covering Asta's face with my whole hand when I notice her sticking her tongue out at him. "You're not using it-

"She'll break it! She breaks everything!"

"Like what?"

"She broke the wheel off my LEGO Turbo Tank!" He argues immediately.

"And your dad fixed that."

"She burst my blow up lightsaber!"

"And you got another one the next day." I remind him as calmly as I can. "Is it really that big a deal? She probably woulda gotten bored of it by now if you hadn't kicked up such a fuss about wanting it back. You know it's just gonna make her want it more."

"I don't care! It's mine and I want it!"

I have two choices here, and both of them make me the bad guy. I can either tell River to get over it and let Asta play with the stupid Thor hammer, which will lead to him hating my guts and accusing me of always taking her side (which I don't!). Or I can tell Asta to give River the hammer back, even though he wasn't playing with it, which will result in her having a melt down and making me feel like an absolute jackass.

I want to let Asta have her way...

But it is River's toy, whether he was playing with it or not. And I do kinda need to score some points with him right now and prove to him that having babies around the house doesn't mean that his toys will always be stolen and his needs won't ever be met.
Parenting fucking blows.

"Asta, give him his toy back."

"But I want it!" She whimpers helplessly, gazing up at me with those big, innocent brown eyes. "Please!"

"I'm sorry, bug. It's his toy and he wants it back."

"But he wasn't playing with it!"

Ah, shit, now she's crying.

I hate making her cry. I hate making any of them cry, even after all this time.

I suck at this!

"I know, but it doesn't matter, it's still his toy." I explain to her gently. "If you don't give it back, I'm gonna do it for you."

She stares at me for a few seconds longer, letting her lower lip tremble uncontrollably just to make me feel as shitty as possible. Then she throws the hammer as hard as she can in River's direction (unfortunately for her, it barely travels two whole feet), and tears out of the room in a hysterical sobbing fit. River victoriously reclaims his Thor hammer and exits the kitchen without a word, leaving me feeling like any energy I had left over after spending all day on "Daddy Duty" is now gone.

Don't get me wrong, I love Taylor and I support his career one hundred percent. But sometimes, when he disappears into a little soundproof room all day to work on demos or have skype writing sessions with his brothers, and the kids are on top of their tattling game... I just wanna march them all down there, open the door, shove them inside, say "you deal with it!", and get the fuck out of the house!

And to think we're planning on bringing another screaming, crying, needy little human into this insanity!

But as crazy as it seems, I still want it. My mind might be berating me for being a goddamn idiot, and all logical arguments might be against us doing this... but for whatever fucked up reason, I want it. I want it more than I've wanted anything in a long time, whether I can put the 'why' into words or not.

After Taylor told me that he hadn't brought up the idea of us having another kid because he wanted to make sure that I wanted it for the right reasons, I put a lot of thought into whether or not his suspicions were even partially correct. It's not like I'd wanna do something as fucked up as bringing a baby into the world just to give myself a sense of purpose. And after many hours of dissecting my own thoughts, I can say without a doubt that's not why I want this. I don't need another kid to make me feel necessary; I already have plenty of that in my life! And honestly, I don't even want this kid just to have a child that's biologically mine. I don't give a shit if I'm the father or Taylor is. Hell, part of me would even prefer it if he was, just so that all of our kids are genetically linked by at least one parent.

It matters to him that I'm the father, though, and it matters to me that he's happy.

I guess, for me... it's all about being there from day one. Before that, even. I know I've been there since before Asta was even a year old; I'm the only other parent she has ever or will ever know. I did raise her. And I love her like she's my own, I love all of them that way. I don't feel like that's
something I'm lacking in my life. But as selfish as it may be, I want to know what it feels like to find out that I'm going to have a kid, to see that first sonogram picture, to hear their heartbeat, to pick out a name, to watch them being born and hear their first cries, to bring them home from the hospital to a nursery that I helped to decorate (I probably was less helpful in that situation than I imagine I'll be, but still...).

Mostly, though, I want to know what it feels like to do all of those things with him.

It just sucks that we can't do all of this by ourselves, and that we have to pay a bunch of total strangers to help us conceive a child and carry it to term. But it is what it is, I guess, and I'll do whatever I have to for us to have this baby. It's just that, in all my life, I never imagined that one day I'd be picking out surrogates and egg donors with my husband. I didn't have it all planned out or anything, but I always kind of assumed I'd end up with a woman and we'd have kids the old fashioned way. I know it's stupid to wish it could be that simple for me and Taylor, but... it's hard not to be kinda resentful. Not of him, not even slightly, but of this situation. Which I know makes me the most ungrateful asshole on the planet. I have it so fucking good, I have nothing to complain about.

And yet, here I am complaining.

"How're you holding up?" I hear Taylor ask from somewhere behind me, causing me to turn around so quickly that I almost trip over my own damn legs. "Sorry! I didn't mean to sneak up on you."

"Yes you did." I mutter, grasping the kitchen island for support and taking a deep breath to calm my frazzled nerves. "You're fucking creepy like that."

He smiles smugly as he walks over to me, snaking his arms around my waist. "You know you like it."

"You know what I like? I like that you're done being a rock star for the day. It's about damn time you got back to being a parent, ya deadbeat!"

"Aw, did the kids give you hell?"

"It's like they were conducting some kind of twisted experiment to see how fucking crazy they could make me."

"How 'fucking crazy' did they make you?" He asks with a soft chuckle, leaning in to kiss the side of my neck.

"Very." I answer petulantly, but with each graze of his lips against my skin, I become more and more unclear on exactly what it was the kids did to push me so close to the brink of insanity. "Don't think I don't know what you're doing."

"Mmm..." His kisses trail up to the corner of my jaw, and I shudder as he murmurs in my ear. "What am I doing?"

"You're trying to distract me so I'll forget the torture your children inflicted on me."

"Is it working."

Yes. Fucker. "No."

"Not even a little?" He questions innocently as his fingers begin to creep under the hem of my t-shirt. "Not even a teeny... tiny... eensy... weensy..."
"Daddy!" Viggo exclaims cheerfully, running straight at us and almost knocking Taylor over like a bowling pin with the force of his hug. "Are you done working?"

"Yup." Taylor does his best to smile, like he wasn't just rudely interrupted while kissing my sanity better. "What've you been up to all day?"

"Tommy took us to the park, and then we had sandwiches, and then me and River and Ezra made a really awesome fort!"

"Oh yeah? Where exactly did you make this really awesome fort?"

Viggo shrugs, unconcerned by Taylor's wary tone. "In the family room. Tommy said we could so long as we put it all back when he says so."

"Which is gonna be in ten minutes." I warn him. "You're not going to the movies with Jenna until everything is cleaned up. And that doesn't mean shoving it all under the couch until tomorrow."

"They're going to the movies?" Taylor asks, a hopeful smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. "Are we going to the movies with them?"

"Nope." I announce proudly. This wasn't exactly how I planned for him to find out, but I'm used to having my 'secrets' blabbed by overexcited kids. "Jenna's gonna drop Penny off at her slumber party thing, take Asta to my sister's for the night, and then take the boys out for dinner and a late movie."

"Sounds like you've got it all figured out."

"'Cause I do."

"What're you gonna do if you don't come see the movie?" Frowns Viggo, suddenly worried that Taylor and I are going to be stuck here all alone. "Won't you be so bored?"

"Well, your dad's gonna make me dinner, for a start." I tell him matter-of-factly, earning an eyebrow raise from Taylor.

"I am?"

"Yeah, rock star, you are. And I'm gonna go sit in a dark, empty room and drink beer while you do it."

"They really did a number on you today, huh?"

"I used the word 'no' so many times it lost all meaning. To them."

He laughs quietly, reaching out to give my arm a comforting squeeze. "I'm sorry."

"Nothing a little alcohol can't cure." I assure him with a tired smile.

Once the kids are all out of the house and Taylor is busy in the kitchen making something that smells way too good for me to be within sniffing distance and not eat it before it's actually ready, my plans to hole up in a dark room and do some drinking change. Not that it doesn't sound appealing, but I got some random and unexpected urge on my way to the movie room, and I ended up taking a detour to the studio instead. Thankfully, it looks like Taylor shut down everything he spent all day working on, so I don't have to worry about somehow fucking it all up by pressing the wrong button or something.

It feels like it's been for-fucking-ever since I came down here to play my own music rather than to
watch Taylor recording (because fuck me if that's not some kind of porn), or to hang out with some friends and help them with their ideas. To be honest... I haven't really felt all that motivated to pick up a guitar recently. I wrote some music at the beginning of the year, and then some more a couple of months ago, right around the time I lost my job. But since then... I don't know, it's like any desire to do anything music related has been absent.

I guess when you get thrown off of the horse, it makes you kinda hesitant to get back on it.

The miserable, self-loathing part of me took what happened with Adam as a sign. Over a decade of struggling to make it in band after band and getting almost nowhere didn't deter me, but getting axed by the guy who finally took a chance on me did. It felt like the universe was pointing at me and laughing, saying, "You seriously thought you were good enough for this?" It didn't help that a bunch of assholes on Twitter were basically saying the exact same thing, it just reinforced every negative thought I had in my head. I let myself believe them.

I shut down.

I didn't know what the hell I was supposed to do next, or what I wanted, or which direction I was supposed to go in, so I just... didn't. I haven't moved forwards, I haven't taken a step, I've just stayed here, paralyzed by self-doubt and indecision. I'm too afraid of making the wrong choice, so I haven't made any choices.

I don't want to lose anything more than I already have; I don't think I can handle it right now.

It feels as though I've been down here for hours when I look up and see Taylor standing in the doorway. He's staring at me in a way that immediately makes me blush and put my guitar down, which is stupid because he watches me play all the damn time. Or... he used to watch me play all the time. I guess it's been a while. Apparently my confidence in my abilities needs more rebuilding than I thought.

"I didn't know you were working on new stuff." He smiles as I get out of my chair and walk towards him. "It sounds awesome."

I shrug awkwardly, averting my eyes to the floor so I don't have to deal with him looking at me like that. "It wasn't anything new. I mean it was, but it wasn't like I was writing or anything. I was just messing around."

"You mess around better than most people."

"Bullshit." I protest, forcing myself to face him again. "I've seen you sitting at that piano a thousand times, playing random bits and pieces, making stuff up. And you know what's crazy? Those made up bits and pieces are better than most of the stuff on your albums." His mouth falls open in indignation, and I roll my eyes at his uncanny ability to take a compliment and turn it into a fucking criticism. "I'm not saying the stuff you record isn't good, it is, but... you're not showing people what you're capable of. I know it doesn't fit into Hanson's 'sound', I just think it sucks that you have to tone it down or whatever."

"Dumb it down, you mean?" He smirks, poking me in the stomach and causing me to recoil for a second before I smash his hand away.

"Your music isn't dumb, and that's not what I said." I correct him firmly before pushing my way past him to leave the room. "I'm done talking to you. What's for dinner?"

We head up to the dining room, but there's nothing on the table, not even silverware or salt and
pepper. I can smell food, so I know dinner actually exists, I just don't know where he put it.

"It's out on the terrace." He explains in amusement after letting me frown at the table for a while. "I figured it was a nice night, no point sitting at a big empty dining table when we could be sitting under the stars."

"There are no stars in Los Angeles. There's too much light pollution."

"Fine, we can sit under the light pollution instead." He chuckles, gesturing for me to go ahead of him as we walk through to the kitchen and out onto the terrace.

"Why're you being all like... chivalrous? I don't need you to wine and dine me, you know I'm a sure thing."

"I actually wasn't trying to romance my way into your pants. I mean, if it happens, it happens, but..."

"Right." I reply suspiciously before taking my seat and looking down at my plate for the first time. "Lasagna? You made me lasagna and you're seriously gonna sit there and tell me you're not trying to get any?"

He holds up his hands in defense, trying to act all shocked and offended that I would accuse him of such a thing. "I just wanted to make you a nice meal to say thank you for dealing with the kids alone all day so I could get some work done."

"You're welcome."

"You know, if you wanna spend a day in the studio sometime, just say the word." He offers sincerely. "I feel like lately it's always me in there and you out here."

"Yeah, 'cause you're trying to finish writing for the new album before we go to Tulsa next month."

"That doesn't mean my music is more important than yours."

I open my mouth to argue that it is, but I stop myself before the words can leave my mouth. I really don't wanna get into it with him and ruin the entire evening. "It's not like I'm working on anything specific right now, though. I know I can go down there anytime, but I don't see the point when I'm not recording anything."

"You don't have to record anything. You can just mess around like you did tonight. Who knows, maybe while you're messing around, you'll come up with something you actually want to record."

"Maybe." I agree quietly in hopes that giving in a little will put an end to this conversation. "I'll think about it."

"Good."

I don't know why I've started to react like this whenever he tries to encourage me to work on something. I get all pissy for no reason. It's not like he's forcing me into the studio, he's just offering. But it feels like if I take him up on the offer, I'm agreeing to actually write a song, like I need to have something to show for my time. And I know that's all me. It's not coming from him, he has no expectations and he's not making any demands. He's trying to be supportive, but for some reason all it does is put me on the defensive.

I'm such a fucking mess.
"Do you wanna take a look at the egg donor database for a while before Jenna brings the boys home?" He suggests in an obvious attempt to coax me back out of my dank shell. "We didn't get a chance last night, and I know you really wanted to."

"Sure."

"We should probably figure out what it is we're even looking for first." I know what I'm looking for, but I'm not gonna find it in that database. "Just basic stuff like hair color, and eye color-"

"Before we go looking at pictures of a bunch of strangers... maybe we should think about what Alyssa said? About how some people ask a sibling to be the donor."

His face falls. It's only a little, and only for a second, but I was watching him closely enough to notice it. "You... you think you'd really wanna go that route?"

"Maybe." I shrug uncertainly, prodding at my lasagna with my fork. "I mean... why spend hours searching a database for someone when we could just ask one of your sisters?"

"I don't know..."

"Think about it. If we could get one of them to help us, then at least the baby would actually be related to you and the kids in some way."

"I just don't see Jess jumping at the chance to help us have a baby. She's still barely comfortable with the idea of us being married."

"Well, what about Avery?" I press insistently, even though it's obvious his hesitance has nothing to do with whether or not we can get either of his sisters to agree to it. "She's always been pretty supportive of us."

"I know, but... I wouldn't feel right asking her to do something like this."

"Why not?"

He exhales a heavy sigh, setting his knife and fork down as he sinks back in his chair. "She's too young."

"She's like in her mid twenties. There are probably dozens of donors in that database who're younger than she is."

"It's different. She's my little sister, Tommy." He argues apologetically. "And even if that wasn't such a big issue for me, I still wouldn't wanna ask her or Jess."

"I just figured that since we can't both be the biological parents, this could be the next best thing, you know?"

"I know, and I get why you think that, but... think about how weird it'd be. You'd basically be having a baby with my sister-"

"It's not like I'm gonna fuck her or anything! And I'm not suggesting we ask her to carry the baby as well. That would be fucking weird."

"It doesn't matter if she carries the baby or not, she's still gonna be the biological mother. I don't wanna just cross my fingers and hope that if we all act like that's not true, none of us will care. I mean... at least with an anonymous donor, they never have to meet the baby. They don't have to see
a kid walking around at family gatherings with their eyes or their smile. Avery would. And who knows how difficult that may or may not be for her. Besides, how are we gonna explain it to our kid when they grow up and ask who their mom is? It's gonna be difficult enough explaining this whole thing to them without having to tell them that their aunt is actually their mom."

"I guess."

"I'm sorry." He reaches out and places his hand over mine, and I let go of my fork so that I can wrap my fingers around his. "I didn't mean to just shoot you down. I didn't realize this was something you'd been seriously considering."

"It's not. Not really. I just... I wanna do this, however we have to do it, but... I guess it bums me out that I can't do it with you. Like... I just want it to be us. I know that's stupid-

"I don't think it's stupid; I feel the same way." He assures me gently, his thumb soothingly stroking the back of my hand while I pout at my plate like a fucking five-year-old who can't have what they want. "We could pretend it's just us, if you want?"

"How the fuck are we supposed to do that?"

"I could get really fat." Damn him. I wasn't done being grumpy yet and now he's making me laugh! "If I start eating for two-

"Are you kidding me?" I snort incredulously. "You already eat enough for four."

"Fine, I'll start eating enough for five, then. I'll complain a lot about how swollen my ankles are, and you can rub my feet. And you can go to the store in the middle of the night to buy me whatever food I happen to be craving."

"And what do I get out of this?"

"You can talk to my tummy." Asshole. "And tell me I'm beautiful when I tell you that I feel like a whale."

"You know what, I take it back." I tell him teasingly, tugging my hand away from his. "I'm really fucking glad I can't knock you up, 'cause it sounds like you'd make my life hell!"

"Hey, I had to play the father-to-be five times! It's my turn to be pregnant, I earned it!"

"You really wanna play at being pregnant?"

"Maybe I do." He smiles smugly as he loads up his fork with another bite of lasagna. "I was just joking around originally, but it's starting to sound like a pretty sweet deal."

"Okay then, mommy, no more caffeine for you!"

He freezes, with his fork poised in mid air, mere inches from his open mouth. And he stays that way for a good five seconds or so before his mouthful of lasagna falls off of his fork and back onto the plate. It's hard to contain my laughter, but I do my best to keep a straight face as I reach over and give his arm a reassuring pat.

"How about we just file that one under 'It Seemed Like A Good Idea Until I Actually Put Some Fucking Thought Into It', and pretend you never said it?"

"Yes please."
For some reason, I thought that choosing an egg donor was going to be one of the easier parts of this process. They'd all been screened by the agency; the women in the database had made the cut. They were intelligent, psychologically stable, and they had good family medical histories. So all we had to do was figure out what else we were looking for in a donor and pick one, right?

Yeah, I know, I'm stupid.

It was pretty obvious from the start that Tommy was looking for someone with as many of my physical characteristics as possible, and I wasn't about to fight him on it if it would make him happy. But he passed over profiles for dozens of tall, blonde haired, blue eyed women who I could see nothing wrong with. After a while it was no longer clear to me exactly what it was he was looking for and not finding in all of them. When I asked him, he shrugged and said he wasn't sure. He just "wasn't feeling it".

We had to give up on our initial search when the kids came home from the movies with Jenna, but any time we found a spare hour or so to ourselves over the next couple of days, we went right back to skimming through profiles. As often as possible, I convinced him to at least note down the numbers of the profiles he'd given a little more thought to before he'd dismissed them, just in case he went through every blue eyed blonde in the entire database and couldn't find anyone who met his undefined standards.

It was ridiculous. He was rejecting a lot of bright, beautiful, talented women and he couldn't (or wouldn't) tell me why.

Until last night.

I finally got it out of him by telling him that I wasn't interested in looking at any more profiles with him if he wasn't going to tell me exactly what he was looking for, and then I left the room. I was being overdramatic, but I was also making a point. And it worked. He came after me and very awkwardly admitted to me what it was that was holding him back from making a choice.

It was their eyes.
Apparently it didn't matter if they were blue, they weren't the right blue. At least, not in his opinion. Being very careful not to sound condescending or dismissive about it, I gently pointed out to him that none of my kids had inherited my blue eyes, and there was probably very little chance that the baby would inherit the donors blue eyes. I could tell he already knew that, deep down. The look on his face when I said it wasn't one of realization, only resignation. I felt like I'd stripped away yet another one of his attempts at making it feel like this baby was ours, not his.

But as I explained to him, it doesn't matter whether or not this baby is related to me by blood, or if it even looks like it could be mine. I'm going to love it just as much as he loves my kids. Because it will be part of him, and I love him more than I could ever attempt to put into words.

It was obvious that he knew that, too. But maybe hearing me say it out loud helped to snap him out of whatever was holding him back from making a choice.

We went back to the bedroom to go over our 'short list', with Tommy finally giving them all serious consideration regardless of the shade of blue their eyes were. It took a while, but we narrowed the list down to two; one is a music major at UCLA, and the other is an aspiring actress who apparently won several singing competitions in high school. The plan was to sleep on it and try to make a final decision in the morning.

Well, it's officially morning.

I know what my choice is, and it's kind of nerve-wracking not knowing his. What if we haven't come to the same conclusion? Then one of us is going to have to give in to what the other wants. I mean, I guess it's not a huge deal; we liked both of these girls, either one would be a good donor... it would just be nice if neither of us had to give up on what our gut told us was the right choice.

Tommy is already home when I get back from dropping the kids off at school. It's usually the other way around, because their school is much closer to home than Asta's pre-school. But Ezra has been dragging his feet a lot these past few days, doing his utmost to make us late (and make me crazy). I refuse to let him, though. I know he's testing me, and I will not fail.

To be fair, it wasn't only his fault that the school drop off took me so long this morning. I got cornered by some women wanting to know if I would be willing to hand out awards to kids at the end of year talent show that the school is having next week. I guess I must have been the only 'celebrity' they could find on such short notice. And it's not like I'm going to say no to helping out with something at my kid's school. Regardless of the fact that I want to be involved whenever possible, the last thing I need is a bunch of angry mothers scowling at me on a daily basis because I wouldn't pin a participation ribbon on their kid's shirt!

Actually, the last thing I need is for one of those women to start criticizing my parenting on social media. I wouldn't put it past a single one of them, which is why I generally do whatever I can to stay on their good sides.

"What happened to you?" Asks Tommy as I walk into the kitchen and make a beeline for the coffee pot. "Yet another Real Housewife of Beverly Hills got a crush on you?"

"Sadly, no."

"Sadly?" He smirks. "I fucking knew you loved the attention."

"It's sad because at least when women flirt with me, I can escape them just by dropping your name into the conversation and politely excusing myself." I sigh tiredly, taking a long sip of my coffee.

"But when a bunch of middle aged women invite me to take part in a school event, I can't really use..."
the same tactic."

"Uh oh. Whatcha signed yourself up for this time? Bake sale? Field trip chaperone?"

"Nah, I just have to hand out some awards at a talent show."

He rolls his eyes at me, shaking his head in disbelief. "Every time, dude. Repeat after me: 'I'm sorry, I can't, I'm really busy'."

"I've tried that one before, but they have very selective hearing."

"You're just afraid of them."

"Damn right I'm afraid of them!" I exclaim as I follow him into the family room. "They hunt in packs!"

"And you're easy prey." He points out, practically falling backwards onto the couch and watching me as I take a seat beside him and set my mug down on the coffee table in front of us. "I've dropped the kids off before, I've seen the way most of the other dads stay in their cars and say goodbye out of the window."

"I don't wanna be like them, though. I'm not a cab driver, I'm a parent."

"I know. You're one of the good ones. That's why the Botox Brigade comes after you all the fucking time."

"Great." I mumble unenthusiastically, sinking back against the couch cushions.

Neither of says anything else for a few minutes. I silently sip my coffee, and Tommy half-heartedly plays tug of war with Duke and his tatty rope toy. Usually we can sit together without speaking and feel completely at ease, but right now there's a definite tension lingering between us. It's the fear of the unknown, and the unwillingness to be the first to bring it up.

But one of us has to broach the subject, otherwise we can't move forward in one direction or the other.

"So-" We both begin at the exact same time, leaving us laughing quietly.

At least the tension has been broken a little. "Moment of truth, huh?"

"I guess..." He nods, taking a deep, unsteady breath as he sits up a little straighter. "I don't know why I'm nervous. It's pathetic."

"Well, you're not the only one."

"What are we supposed to do if we didn't choose the same donor? Flip a coin?"

I can't help chuckling to myself, even though I can't think of a better alternative. "It's weird to think that anything about this could ever be determined by something like that."

"I know, but... I don't want us to like get pissed at each other because neither of us wants to budge. I don't wanna fight about it."

"Me either."

"Flipping a coin kinda seems like the only fair way to decide." He shrugs almost helplessly.
"We might not even need to, though."

"Only one way to find out, right?"

"Music major or actress... on the count of three." I attempt to smile in an effort to lighten the mood, but I don't think it works on either of us. "One... two-"

"Wait!" Tommy anxiously grabs my arm to stop me before I get any further. "Are we saying it after three or instead of three?"

Before I can answer his question, my phone starts ringing. At first I plan on ignoring it, but when I glance at it to see who's calling and see the name of the surrogacy agency on my screen, I'm too curious to let it go to voicemail.

"Hello?"

"Hi, is this Taylor?"

"Yeah. Alyssa?" I ask hopefully, noticing how Tommy's expression instantly morphs from annoyed to attentive in a split second when he hears her name.

"Is this a good time? I can call back if-"

"No!" I cut her off quickly. "This is a great time. What's up? Is everything okay?"

"Everything's fine. I just wanted to give you a heads up that I'm about to send over the first handful of matches that I've come up with for you guys." I think I unintentionally held my breath a second ago and now I can't remember how to exhale. "Taylor?"

"Yeah, sorry. I was just a little surprised. I mean, I know you told us you could have a match for us within a couple of days, but it still feels so fast."

"I understand." She laughs softly. "I hope you aren't feeling rushed, because no one on our end has any expectations as far as how much time you take to make a decision. Like I said at our first meeting, you're under absolutely no obligation to choose a surrogate from this first set of matches, or any future matches we might send you."

Now it's my turn to laugh, because Tommy is sitting so damn close to me in his attempts to try to hear the other side of the conversation that he may as well just sit on my lap. I guess I could put Alyssa on speaker phone... but this is more fun for me.

"Thanks, we appreciate that."

"Okay, well, I'll send the email your way within the next few minutes, and you take all the time you need looking through the profiles."

"We will."

"Have you had any luck looking through the egg donor database?" She inquires hopefully. "I know there's a lot to go through, and you've had access to it for less than a week, but if you have any questions about any of the profiles, I can do my best to answer them."

"We did find a couple of donors we were really interested in. We were just about to make a final choice when you called, actually."

"Perfect! I'll let you get back to it, then. Feel free to call or email me whenever you've made your
decision."

"Thanks, Alyssa."

By the time the call ends, Tommy is staring at me so expectantly that he vaguely resembles Duke when he's waiting for a treat. I kinda want to keep him in suspense a little longer just to see if I can get him to beg, but I know how much I'd hate it if he did that to me.

"That was Alyssa."

"Yeah, I kinda figured that part out already." He tells me impatiently. "What did she say? Did she find us a match?"

"She found us a few. She's sending them over now."

His face lights up instantly, which somehow makes any and all anxiety I was feeling evaporate entirely. It just reinforces the fact that his happiness is more important in all of this than getting anything my own way. Honestly, it just doesn't matter as long as he keeps smiling like that.

"It's so weird to think that by the end of today we might have chosen a donor and a surrogate."

"That would be amazing, but I don't think we should get our hopes up just yet." I warn him as sensitively as I can. "This is only the first set of matches, and she said she would send more if we didn't find anyone we really liked the first time around, so-"

"Could you possibly be any more negative about this? You're right, maybe we won't find anyone we really like this time. But maybe we will." He insists almost naively.

I've never seen him like this about anything before. As much as I want him to be happy, sometimes it kinda scares me how optimistic he's being. I don't want him to be pessimistic or anything, but I worry that he might be setting himself up for disappointment. Usually he'll hope for the best while preparing for the worst. But when it comes to this baby, he seems to be so wrapped up in hoping for the best that he's forgotten to prepare for anything else. I feel like I'm trying to prepare enough for the both of us, which I know is ultimately going to do no good. Apparently trying to convince him to rein in his expectations isn't going to do any good either, though, so I guess I should just keep my mouth shut.

"Okay, well, before we even start on the surrogate search, let's put an end to the donor one."

"Count of three again?"

"After three." I nod apprehensively, turning a little in my seat so that I can look him right in the eyes. This could be it, the first bump in the long road to parenthood... "One... two... three..."

I unintentionally close my eyes as I blurt out my donor choice, like I'm afraid to see his reaction. We're both silent after we've spoken, and it takes me a moment of two to work up the courage to slowly open my eyes again and find out if I heard him right when he said "music major".

And judging by the grin on his face, I did.

"Thank fuck." He exhales in relief, slumping backwards into the plump cushions behind him.

"I seriously thought we were gonna pick different donors." I admit with a weary chuckle as I allow myself to follow his example and relax completely for the first time all morning. "I'm so glad we don't have to depend on a coin toss to figure it out."
"Yeah, no shit."

"I feel like I need to take a nap; being nervous is **exhausting.**"

"You shoulda been less negative about it, then you wouldn't have been so nervous." He chastises me teasingly.

"Oh, like you weren't even a *little* nervous?"

"I wasn't! I knew I picked the right donor, so I had nothing to be worried about."

Liar! "You just *said* you were nervous five minutes ago!"

"I was trying to make you feel better." He shrugs, doing his utmost to keep up his nonchalance. "I'm considerate like that."

"You're so full of it."

Reaching behind me, I grab one of the smaller couch cushions and quickly swipe it right at his head. Unfortunately for me, he saw the attack coming and he manages to block it with his arm and then snatch the cushion out of my hands. I try to tackle him before he can put his new weapon to use, but even when I'm on top of him he still manages to rain down a relentless barrage of cushion beatings on my head and back. I don't put a lot of thought into my next action, it's survival instinct!

I lower my mouth to his chest and bite his nipple through his shirt.

"*Ow!*" He yelps, his whole body bucking beneath mine before he unceremoniously shoves me so hard that I roll off of him and onto the floor. "What the fuck was that for?!"

"I don't know!" I admit honestly, unable to control my laughter as I try my hardest to fend off Duke's over excited attempts to jump on me. "Are you okay?"

"No!" He grumbles as he pulls the neck of his t-shirt out in front of him so that he can look down at his chest and see how much damage I've done. "I'm probably gonna need to have my damn nipple surgically reattached!"

"Oh, come on! I've bitten you harder than that before, you've *asked* me to!"

"That's different." He grabs his cushion again and whacks me in the face with it. "I know it's coming when I ask for it."

"I'm sorry. Will you let me make it up to you?" I ask, giving him my best baby blues as I push myself up until I'm sitting on the floor in front of him.

His glare only becomes more perceptible, which means I'm close to winning him over even though he doesn't want me to. "*How?*

"You can bite me back."

"Where?"

"Wherever you want."

"That's a dangerous offer." He retorts, raising a skeptical eyebrow at me. "Wanna make any exceptions?"
"Nah." I shrug unconcernedly. "I know you won't risk damaging anything that your sex life is dependent on."

After giving my confident assertion a moment of thought, he pouts as he realizes that I'm completely right. So he picks his cushion back up and hits me over the head a few more times. And I let him, because I know that I more than deserve it. In fact, I even throw in some feigned sounds of discomfort each time the cushion connects with my body, just to give him a bigger sense of achievement.

Both of us would like nothing more than to check my email and look at the surrogate profiles that Alyssa sent over, but it's going to have to wait. I have a record company meeting with my brothers and some of our staff via conference call, which will probably last until lunch time because these calls always do. It's better than it used to be when we were all in the same room, though. Back then our meetings could go on all damn day. It's harder for us to get off track when we're on the phone; there are fewer tangents and people are much less likely to get the urge to pull up random youtube videos that they suddenly feel the need to show everyone else in the room.

When the kids are at school, I generally conduct conference calls in the dining room. I'll put my cell on speaker phone so that I can keep both hands free. One for drinking coffee and one for typing notes or scrolling documents on my Mac Book. Every so often Tommy will wander through the room, and if either of my brothers voices is coming out of the speaker on my phone, he'll mockingly mouth along to whatever they're saying. I try to focus my gaze on my Mac Book screen instead of him so that I won't laugh, but I still know he's there and I know what he's doing.

He's highly distracting.

Today he's coming in and out of the room more frequently than I think he ever has during one of my conference calls, because today he's more impatient than usual for it to be over. And so am I, which is probably why it ends up going straight through lunch. Lucky for me, I have an amazing husband to bring me food so that I won't have to suffer on an empty stomach. And as ready as I am to be done with all of the talking, and planning, and debating (or arguing), at least by the time we say our goodbyes we've finalized enough issues to make another record company meeting unnecessary until I'm actually in Tulsa next month.

Almost the second my call with Ike and Zac ends, Tommy appears in the doorway again. He's looking at me eagerly, like he's waiting for me to give him permission to come in and sit down. Honestly, as much as I wanted to get back to our surrogate search as soon as possible, I also want to get my ass out of this chair before they meld together for all eternity!

There's no way I can really say no to that face, though, so I gesture with a nod of my head for him to join me.

But I don't even have chance to open my email before my phone starts ringing again. At first I'm nervous that it's one of my brothers calling to rehash one of the many topics I thought we'd already discussed to death, so I'm relieved to see Holden's name on the screen when I cautiously turn my phone over to look at the caller ID.

"Hey! What's up?"

"Are you busy?"

Something about the tone of his voice instantly has me on edge. "No, why? Are you okay?"

"Not really." He sighs so heavily that it feels like whatever weight it is he's under has just settled on
"Our surrogate took a home pregnancy test today. It was negative."

Shit. "I'm sorry, Holden. That really sucks."

"Yeah, it does. I mean, technically it's still 'too early' to know for sure. We have our beta hCG test on Monday, but I doubt it's gonna tell us anything different."

"Maybe it will, though."

"That's what Ryan keeps saying, but I think he's in denial. It's been eight days since the embryo transfer, and I've done enough research to know that a lot of surrogates have positive home test results even earlier than this. I don't wanna get my hopes up and cling to a 'maybe', and then be crushed all over again when we get the test results next week."

"Yeah, I get that." I acknowledge sympathetically. "Is there anything we can do?"

"You're doing it right now. You and Tommy are the only two people besides our parents who even know that we're doing this, and I know that if I call my mom she's going to give me a pep talk and tell me to stay positive, like Ryan. I just... I can't hear that right now."

"Do you have to work today?"

"Yeah, I'm on my break. I'm actually glad I don't have to be at the apartment; I can hardly stand Ryan's 'everything is rainbows' crap via text messages, so I doubt I'd handle it too well in person."

"I know it's hard to be around that kind of blind optimism when you're trying to accept reality, but you know it's just his way of dealing." I remind him gently, hoping that it's not going to result in him being pissed at me, too. "Deep down he's probably feeling just as shitty as you are, but he doesn't want to feel shitty."

"But he's going to have to. All he's doing by pretending there's still a chance is delaying the inevitable, and then he's going to be an even bigger mess on Monday when the doctor confirms what the home test already told us."

I wish I knew what to say to him, but this is the first time I've ever had to console someone over a failed IVF treatment. When Natalie and I were trying to get pregnant with Asta, and we had months of negative home pregnancy test results, I perfected my "maybe next time" commiseration speech. But I can't use it on Holden. I can't tell him that they just have to keep trying and that it'll happen when it's meant to, because every time they try it costs them more money.

There are only so many times they can go through this whole process before they wind up babyless and broke.

I feel so useless. He's been there for us through so much, and this is the first time he's ever really needed support from me on something more important than a petty argument with Ryan... and I've got nothing.

"What time is your shift over?"

"Officially I'm off at seven, but I'm usually here until almost eight."

"Wanna come over and get drunk when you're done with work?" I offer sincerely.

When I hear a quiet breath of laughter on the other end of the phone, I feel like even if he doesn't accept the invitation, at least I managed to cheer him up for a second. "Tempting... but I should
probably just go home. I don't want Ryan to be sitting around all night by himself in case he somehow snaps out of his happy haze and has a meltdown."

"You're a good husband." I assure him sincerely, coaxing another soft chuckle from him. "He's lucky to have you."

"I'm not sure he'd agree with you on that right now. I'm not sure I agree with you." He takes another long, tired breath before groaning in dissatisfaction. "I have to get back to work."

"Call us if you need anything, okay?"

"I will."

"And that offer to come over and drink your sorrows away is a standing one."

"I wouldn't be surprised if we both take you up on it at some point soon." He tells me in a distinct warning tone. "Like maybe Monday night soon."

"I'll stock up just in case."

"Thanks, Taylor."

"Any time."

I can't bring myself to look at Tommy after I've ended the call. I could feel his curiosity throughout the entire conversation, and I'm confident he must have come to a pretty accurate conclusion of what it was we were talking about. He doesn't want to hear it anymore than I want to say it, but we both know there's no way we can avoid it. We can't just pretend my phone never rang and go back to what we were doing before Holden's call.

"No baby?" He eventually asks, his sad brown eyes dark with dread.

I shake my head faintly, my gaze still trained on my cell phone so that I won't have to see the expression on his face. "No baby."

We've been full steam ahead with this whole surrogacy thing, and somehow Holden and Ryan's misfortune feels like a fallen tree on our tracks. I don't expect it to derail us or put a stop to our journey or theirs.

But it's forcing us to pause.

It's forcing Tommy to pause and realize that, no matter how smoothly things seem to have been going for us so far, there could still be heartache ahead. And when I finally summon the strength to turn and face him, I can tell by the look in his eyes that he's realized just how unprepared he is for that.
Chapter 9

After receiving Holden's phone call, our plans to dive right into choosing a surrogate came to a screeching halt. It was as though our excitement evaporated, and all either of us could bring ourselves to do for the rest of the afternoon was sit together in silence on the couch and 'watch' TV. We were both too lost in our thoughts to even notice what shows were on as they came and went, and even though Tommy was snuggled up against me, there was a definite sense of distance between us.

I guess being off in your own world has that effect.

Having the kids home from school helped to distract us from the negativity and uneasiness we'd been living with all afternoon, and for a few hours it was like nothing had even happened. But once we were alone in our bedroom at the end of the night, it all came rushing back. We looked at each other as we began to undress for bed, everything just stopped for a moment, and then we wordlessly walked towards each other. I wrapped my arms around him and held him tightly, and he sighed so heavily that it felt as though he must have been waiting all evening to do so. It was a relief. A *release*.

We admitted to each other that Holden and Ryan's bad luck had shaken us, and that the idea of going through the same thing was much more difficult than we'd realized. We'd both been aware of the possibility that it could take more than one attempt for our surrogate to become pregnant, but just like Holden and Ryan, we'd gotten too excited to truly believe it would happen to us. It suddenly felt a lot more like a distinct possibility than a remote one, and it was terrifying. But as much as I think we both wanted to reassure each other that it would be okay, that we would handle it just fine if it took several tries before we got a positive pregnancy test, we knew it was pointless. Neither of us could say for sure, and pretending anything else would have been tantamount to lying. To ourselves *and* to each other.

No matter how intimidating the thought of dealing with multiple IVF attempts was, though, it wasn't enough to scare us off. We may have needed a moment (or an afternoon) to come to terms with reality, but that was all. When we woke up the next morning, that fallen tree had been lifted off of our tracks, and we were ready to start moving forward again.
Unfortunately, none of the surrogate matches that Alyssa had sent us really stood out. They all sounded great, there was nothing wrong with any of them. Maybe it's naive of us to think that when we come across the profile for the person who's going to carry our baby we'll somehow know that they are the one. But that's how we both feel, and we aren't willing to give up on that just to move things along faster. So we sent an apologetic email to Alyssa declining to arrange a meeting with any of the matches she'd sent us, and asking her to let us know as soon as she finds more.

That was Thursday evening, and neither of us was really expecting to receive more matches on Friday... but that doesn't mean we're handling the waiting all that well. We've been doing our best to be patient and to focus on other things, but it's undeniably frustrating. This whole process is frustrating, and daunting, and expensive, and so many other things that most straight couples don't have to experience when trying to get pregnant. I'm already sick of filling out forms and reading profiles, and we've barely even started. It makes me feel selfish and ungrateful to think this way, and maybe I am those things...

But that doesn't make it any less unfair that Tommy and I can't just have a whole lot of sex in order to have a baby! Unlike the surrogacy process, that would be satisfying, relaxing, and completely free!

I've decided to put my pouting and impatience on hold as much as I possibly can, though. Penny was trying to tell me about something that happened at school while we were having dinner on Friday night, and I missed most of her story because my mind was so preoccupied with all of this surrogacy stuff. I felt like shit as soon as I realized that I'd been tuning out the kids I already have in order to stress about one that doesn't even exist yet! So I made a promise to myself that I'm not going to think about it when I'm with them. I'm going to be present and engaged, I'm going to give them the attention they need and deserve.

The same goes for my relationship with Tommy. I told him last week that I didn't want what we have to fall by the wayside just because we're having a kid. And even though things between us haven't really changed much, I still feel like all of this is constantly on our minds when we're together now. Sometimes it feels like it's all we talk about anymore, and that's ridiculous. Not only because there's so many other things going on in our lives, but because there's really nothing new to discuss. We're just going over and over the same things, making this wait seem even longer and driving ourselves crazy.

We always have much more fun when we drive each other crazy instead.

"Damn, you feel good..." I hear Tommy moan breathlessly, his fingertips digging into my hips as he thrusts into me relentlessly with so much force that it almost hurts. But only almost. He's an expert at pushing me right to the edge of that thin line between pleasure and pain, but never quite sending me over it. "I swear you're tighter in the morning."

"If you keep saying shit like that, I'm gonna come!" I warn him earnestly, grasping desperately at the sheets beneath me with one had as I mindlessly stroke my erection with the other.

"Don't you fucking dare."

I feel his right hand release its bruising grip on me, and only a second later he's grabbed my wrist and pinned my arm behind my back with enough power to push my entire upper body down onto the mattress. And he never stops fucking me for even a second. I can tell from his breathing that he's close, but having him dominate me like this is enough of a turn on that I still feel like I could come at any second, whether he allows me to touch myself or not!

His body slams violently into mine one last time, and I feel him pulse inside of me as his movements immediately slow and come to a gradual stop. I let out an involuntary whimper as he abruptly pulls
out of me, but instead of releasing his grip on my arm so that I can finally get myself off, he turns me over onto my back. My head is spinning uncontrollably, and the sudden and unexpected sensation of his hot, wet mouth on me does absolutely nothing to slow it down.

Just knowing that this is why he didn't want me to come is enough. He wanted me for himself, and I've never been any good at denying him.

I've never wanted to.

When we're both completely satiated, he leaves a lazy line of kisses across my stomach and chest until his lips find mine. The difference between his current demeanor and the way he was treating me only a moment ago is night and day, and the contrast makes his gentle kisses and caresses feel even more loving.

"Holy shit." He gasps in exhaustion before collapsing in a heap beside me on the bed.

I can't help but laugh softly to myself over his choice of words. Holy. It's strange to think that only a few years ago I would have been in a church back in Tulsa right about now, listening to some preacher talking about a God I haven't believed in since I was a teenager.

This is definitely my preferred way to spend my Sunday mornings.

"What got into you this morning?" I ask, summoning what little energy I have left so that I can turn my head to look at him. "It was like you were already inside me before I'd even opened my eyes!"

"I don't know." He admits with a devilish smile. "I was just horny as fuck for some reason."

"Sex dream?"

"Maybe."

"It better have been about me." I tease him, nudging his thigh with my knee. "I won't have you dream cheating on me."

He rolls his eyes at me, smacking me playfully on the chest. "Who would I dream cheat on you with?"

"How should I know? Maybe your subconscious has conjured up some gorgeous, young, sexy-"

"Why the hell would I bother creating some imaginary fuck buddy? The sex we have in reality is way better than any I've ever had in my dreams. If I'm gonna have a sex dream, odds are it's gonna be about something we already did together."

"Well, if I have a sex dream anytime soon, odds are it's gonna be about what we just did. Because fuck."

With a smug smile, he pushes himself up onto slightly shaky arms and crawls on top of me, pecking me temptingly on the lips. "You're welcome."

I'd love nothing more than to lie here with him all day, but a brief glance at the alarm clock on my nightstand reminds me that we're living on borrowed time. The kids are going to start waking up any minute now, and neither of us is in any state to be making them breakfast.

"It's getting late." I sigh disappointedly, combing his messy hair away from his face with my fingers, only to let it fall delicately back into place again. "We should get cleaned up."
"Don't wanna." He mumbles before turning his face towards my hand and pressing a kiss to my palm. "I like being dirty."

"Then you can stay here and be dirty." I tell him as I hold on firmly to his hips and practically lift him off of me. "I'm gonna take a shower and start on breakfast."

I hear him whine in protest, but I do my best not to let his sulking sway me from my very adult decision to get out of bed. He continues to pout at me as I make my way to the bathroom, until eventually I have to force myself to look away so that I won't give in to him. It's not like I'm enjoying being the responsible one; I don't wanna get up anymore than he does. I honestly cannot remember the last time we spent an entire day together, and the idea of lounging in bed with him from sun up to sun down sounds more appealing to me right now than anything has in a long time.

But sadly, it's just not in the cards for us today.

What is in the cards is spending some quality time with the kids outside of the house, because it feels like they've been cooped up indoors all week. Whether they're at school or at home, they barely get a chance to run around and expend some of their seemingly endless energy. And even though we've all been home together every night this week, and we were all here yesterday, we haven't really spent time together as a family. Everyone is off doing their own thing, and ever since our big announcement about bringing another baby into the family, things haven't felt entirely right. Tommy and I have been distracted, and the kids have been almost standoffish with both of us. Especially Ezra.

I need to snap them out of it, and I've decided that the best way to do that is to force them to hang out with us until they like us again!

After breakfast I order everyone to go back upstairs and grab a change of clothes, and to make sure they're wearing something that they don't mind getting wet. Meanwhile Tommy gathers up everything on the hastily scrawled packing list I gave him, and I make enough sandwiches to feed a small village. Viggo and Asta are excited to go on an 'adventure', but their older siblings aren't quite as enthused. That lack of interest only increases after I tell them to leave all books, toys and handheld games behind when we leave the house.

The forty minute drive out to Altadena feels twice as long because of all of the whining and bickering going on in the backseat. It's almost enough to make me turn the minivan around and take them all home to their precious DVDs and video games. But I keep reminding myself why I'm doing this, and it strengthens my resolve to get us where we're going.

Thankfully, the complaining stops once we arrive at Eaton Canyon Falls. River realizes where we are, and he's suddenly ten times more excited than he was just seconds before. I honestly can't tell who is more desperate to get out of the minivan, him or Duke. There isn't necessarily anything extraordinary about this place. There are plenty of other hikes, nature trails, and waterfalls in the Los Angeles area. But when we came here for the first time last summer, everyone had such an amazing time. We spent the whole day exploring and laughing together, and everything felt right. I guess I was hoping that if I brought them back here, maybe some of that nostalgia might rub off on them.

Then perhaps they'll remember that Tommy and I aren't all that bad to be around sometimes.

The trail to the falls from where we've parked is only half a mile long, but it's rocky and takes us close to an hour to navigate because Asta insists that she does not want to be carried. River and Viggo don't mind the slow pace she has set for us; it gives them ample time to climb onto and jump off of every boulder they see. Penny seems to be enjoying the sunshine and helping her little sister navigate the uneven path, but Ezra is still a lot quieter than I'd hoped. The only thing he's interested
in is Duke, who is dragging him back and forth across the trail and into the surrounding brush as he investigates every smell he comes across.

When we finally get to the falls, I’m relieved to see that it’s not too crowded yet. There a few other families and some hikers, but the wading pool at the foot of the waterfall isn’t teeming with people. Tommy and I find a spot in the shade with a clear view of the water, and the kids all take off towards it at varying speeds and degrees of excitement. The boys stomp and splash as Duke pounces in and out of the water around them, while Penny and Asta opt for taking it a little slower and staying a little drier. Any time Duke lunges eagerly towards them, Asta screams and holds her hands out in an attempt to keep him at bay. And each time, Penny takes her by the hand and coaxes her a little further away from their rowdy brothers and a little deeper into the water.

Within five minutes or so, I get tired of sitting by and watching them have all of the fun. Tommy insists that he’s fine hanging out by himself if I want to go and play with the kids, but I refuse to accept that. He tries to resist when I grab both of his hands and struggle to pull him up onto his feet, but I’m stronger than he is. The second he’s standing, I bend down and wrap my arm around his waist before attempting to throw him over my shoulder. It doesn’t really go the way I’d planned, and I basically end up half carrying and half pushing him over to the water. He loses his footing on some slippery rocks pretty quickly, and topples over backwards into the wading pool with an enormous splash that soaks Penny and Asta from head to toe. But after their initial gasps and squeals of shock and horror, they both start laughing along with their brothers.

Tommy sits up in the water, pushing his soaking wet hair out of his eyes and then fixing them on me with a death glare. "Get him!"

I don’t have a chance to protest or plead for mercy, all I can do is run for my life (as much as anyone can when they’re up their knees in water). It’s a totally unfair fight, there’s six of them and a dog, and they’re coming at me from every direction! So eventually I simply give up and accept whatever payback they decide to inflict on me.

It doesn’t take long for the kids to get hungry. Between the drive, the hike, and chasing each other through the water, they’ve definitely worked up an appetite. We sit together on some rocks in the shade and eat the lunch I packed for us, watching as more and more people arrive at the falls. By the time we’re done eating, the wading pool is packed and therefore much less appealing to the kids than it was before. Duke is quickly getting restless, itching to explore, so Tommy suggests we take a look around. Everyone but Ezra seems enthusiastic about the idea, and usually I’d go with a ‘majority rules’ approach and force him to tag along anyway.

But I feel like I’d be missing an opportunity if I take that route today.

"Why don't you guys go ahead." I tell Tommy, hoping that holding eye contact with him for long enough will somehow convey my thoughts to him. "We'll catch up later."

"Okay..." He frowns slightly as he glances back and forth between me and Ezra. "I doubt we'll get too far if Asta insists on walking by herself again."

"With any luck, she'll be so tired after all of this that she'll be begging to be carried back to the car."

He holds up both hands with his fingers crossed, mouthing silent pleas to the sky before following the kids over to the trees nearby. Ezra is still pretending to be oblivious to everything going on around him, but I know he’s not. And I know he’s completely aware that I stayed behind with him for a reason. I just hope it means that he’s willing to talk to me.

"We should do stuff like this more often." I begin hopefully as he picks up a pebble from the ground
and begins turning it over and over between his fingers. He's fidgeting, which means he's anxious, which means there's a good chance he'll clam up if I say the wrong thing. "You looked like you were having a good time before." For a moment there's nothing but silence from him, and he's completely still. Until finally he nods faintly. "It was nice to see you playing with your brothers and having fun."

"I guess."

Maybe I was wrong. Maybe he has no interest in talking to me at all. It sure as hell seems like he wishes I'd just shut up. But I'm me, so I can't. "You've been quiet lately."

He shrugs, tossing the pebble aside. "I didn't have anything to say."

"Well... do you have something to say now?"

"I don't know." He mumbles glumly. "You probably won't listen to me anyway."

"I am listening, Ez. I'm right here, and I'm asking you to talk to me."

"But you don't hear me when I talk. I already told you how I feel, and you just say I'll feel differently later. But what if I don't? None of us want another baby around. Not me, or Penny, or River, or Viggo. We don't need another baby."

"You know, I remember when you found out that your mom was pregnant with Viggo, and then again with Asta."

"I venture bravely, fully aware that I'm grasping at straws and hoping that bringing up Natalie in any small way isn't going to shut him down completely. "You weren't all that thrilled about it back then, but you love them both now, right? You're a great big brother-"

"Yeah, 'cause they're here and I have to love them." He impatiently points out. "But you don't have to have another baby."

"Can you tell me why you think it would be so terrible?"

He heaves a heavy sigh, as though my cluelessness is tiring him out. "Because it was before."

"Before? You mean... with Asta?"

"I study him closely, every tiny move he makes, everywhere his gaze goes. His silence is really all the answer I need, but I don't want to go down this road with him if it's going to make him even more upset. "Ezra-"

"Everything was better before she came along." He snaps, and it seems as though he immediately feels ashamed of himself for it. He squeezes his eyes tightly shut and shakes his head slowly, sadly. "I know it's not her fault, and I don't hate her anymore or anything. But... it was just better before she was born."

Part of me is undeniably broken hearted to hear him say it out loud. I wasn't stupid enough to believe that he would ever prefer a life without his mom to one where she was still here. I just foolishly thought that we'd moved past it. That he'd accepted the way things were and he'd found a way to be happy and live his life without the constant cloud of her death hanging over him.

Maybe he had.

And maybe telling him about our plans to have a baby brought it all rushing back to him just when he'd started to leave it behind.

"You're right." I tell him quietly, and he immediately looks up at me in surprise. I want to kick myself for letting him think for even a second that I'm agreeing with him about things being better
before. Maybe they were for him, but they weren't for me. I really don't want to go there though; he
doesn't ever need to hear me say those things again. "It wasn't Asta's fault. It wasn't anyone's fault." I
continue, watching in regret as his whole body seems to deflate. "I wish I could make things the way
they used to be for you, buddy, I honestly do. But no one can change the past. The only thing any of
us can do is hold on to the memories that are worth taking with us and try to move forward."

"You just want me to forget about mom and be okay with you and Tommy having another baby."

"What I want is for you to be happy. And for your brothers and sisters to be happy, and for Tommy
to be happy..." I shake my head helplessly as I try to figure out how the hell to explain this to him. "I
want us all to be happy, and I don't know how to make that happen when everyone wants
completely different things."

"So you want me to say that I want what you want so that everything is easy, even if I don't want
what you want." He accuses bluntly. "I don't even get why you're trying to make me be okay with it.
You don't really care what I think."

"That's not true, Ezra. I want you to be okay with it because I want you to be okay. Period. I thought
that after everything we've been through, you knew that."

With an unmistakable roll of his eyes, he gets to his feet and brushes the dirt off of his shorts. "I
know that having a baby is gonna ruin everything. And I know you're gonna do it anyway."

He stalks off in the direction of the path we took to get here from the car, leaving me sitting alone in
the suddenly way too cold shade. I can't take my eyes off of him until he's out of sight, and even then
I just stare at the last place I saw him before he disappeared onto the trail.

I want to get up and go after him. I know I need to go after him in case he doesn't go straight back to
the car and wanders off somewhere by himself.

But I can't seem to make my legs work.

I can't make anything work.

I don't know if it's shock or fear flowing through my veins right now, but something has me
paralyzed. I feel as though I can't make a move without it being the wrong one. No matter which
direction I choose, I hurt someone I love. If I follow Ezra, I leave Tommy behind. I know that right
now it's really only a matter of ensuring that my son doesn't get lost in the San Gabriel Mountains,
but deep down it feels as though I'm making a different choice entirely.

Once upon a time, this feeling of being torn was incredibly familiar to me. But over the last few years
I haven't felt it at all. I was whole for the first time in my life. No loose threads. No frayed edges.

Now it feels as though it's all beginning to unravel again.

The kid I just had a conversation didn't sound like the one I've been living with for the last two years.
He sounded a hell of a lot like the kid who spent months shut away in his room, refusing to speak to
me in full sentences, refusing to even sit down and eat a meal with his family. The kid who got
suspended from school for cussing out a teacher, who destroyed a hand painted mural on his
bedroom wall, who ran away from home...

The kid who ran out onto a busy Beverly Hills street to get away from me and almost got hit by a
car.

I feel like I'm on the verge of losing my son all over again.
What the fuck am I supposed to do?
Chapter 10

When I finally felt capable of getting to my feet and going after Ezra, I quickly sent Tommy a text to let him know that we'd meet him and the rest of the family at the car whenever they were ready to head back. It took several attempts to send because the reception out in the canyon was so hit and miss, but after much cussing on my part, it eventually went through.

I had to run to catch up to Ezra, he had a good head start and his pace was much faster than usual because his anger was doing all of the driving. I didn't try to talk to him because I could tell he didn't want to listen. I had no idea what to say to him anyway, I was too afraid of making it worse. So I kept my distance and followed him back down the trail to the car. He wouldn't even look at me as I unlocked the doors to let him get in, and I couldn't help thinking that me joining him would only make us both feel claustrophobic. So I took a seat on a nearby log instead and waited for Tommy and the kids to return.

I managed to get through the entire afternoon without having to tell Tommy about my conversation with Ezra. Mostly because one of the kids was always within earshot. I was grateful for their presence, because trying to explain everything to Tommy is unlikely to go very well when I have no idea how I feel about anything anymore. But I know I can't hide from him forever. He knows something pretty significant happened after he left the two of us alone together at the falls. I tried to act like everything was totally fine, but Ezra had no incentive to hide his mood from anyone. He was silent and sullen for the rest of the day, and I think it's fair to say that even Asta knows he's upset at this point.

But dinner is quickly coming to an end here. And once the kids scatter to various other rooms and leave the two of us alone to clean up, I'm not going to have any excuses left. Which is why I just slipped my phone out of my pocket under the table and texted "SOS" to Zac. If I tell Tommy I need to make a call, he'll tell me it can wait until after I've filled him in on what happened with Ezra. But if someone calls me, there's a good chance he'll put his curiosity on hold until I finish my conversation.

I hope.

My phone starts to ring almost as soon as I've stood up to carry the dinner dishes through to the kitchen, and even though Tommy scowls at me in disapproval when I excuse myself, he doesn't stop...
me from answering it.

"Hey, what's up?" I ask in my most convincingly cheerful tone as I make my way quickly out of the dining room (and out of Tommy's hearing range).

"I was about to ask you the same thing." Zac replies uncertainly. "What's the 'SOS' thing about?"

"Dude, I am having the worst day."

"Did someone die?"

"No."

"Did your dick fall off?"

"No!"

"Then it's not the worst day." He informs me matter-of-factly, ever the level-headed realist. "You're being over-dramatic. As usual."

Glancing over my shoulder to make sure that no one has followed me, I shut myself in the studio and lock the door. "Ezra basically told me that he hates the idea of me and Tommy having another baby."

"That's normal. Shep didn't exactly jump for joy when we told him we were having another baby last year-"

"It's more than that. He's not just unenthusiastic about it, he really doesn't want us to do it. He said it's going to ruin everything and that he knows I'm still gonna do it anyway because I don't care."

"Seriously? That sounds like something twenty-twelve Ezra would've said."

"When I was talking to him this afternoon, it almost felt like I was talking to the kid he was three years ago." I sigh miserably as I sink down into one of the desk chairs by the mixing console. "I can't just stand by and watch him pull away from me like that all over again, Zac. But I'm afraid that if Tommy and I go through with having this baby, it's gonna mess up my relationship with Ezra."

"Yeah..."

"And I'm afraid that if I tell Tommy that I've changed my mind about us having a baby, it's gonna devastate him."

"Again, you're being over-dramatic." Insists Zac as gently as he can. "He might be disappointed, but I doubt it's gonna devastate him."

"A year ago, I would've agreed with you. But he's been pretty down recently. He feels like everyone else is doing all these big, exciting things and he's got nothing to look forward to. The idea of us having a baby made him so happy, it gave him something to be excited and hopeful about... I don't want to take that away from him."

I hear my little brother inhale slowly on the other end of the line, and I can practically see his face right in front of me, his brow furrowed in deep thought as he tries to figure out what the hell I'm supposed to do to rectify the shitty situation I've found myself in. But when he exhales a long, defeated breath, I know he's as clueless as I am.

"I don't know what to tell you, man. I'm sorry."
"It's okay. I didn't even really expect you to know what I should do, I was just trying to buy myself a little more time to come up with something to tell Tommy."

"Maybe just... tell him that you still wanna have a baby, but you think you guys should wait until the kids have had more time to get used to the idea. Then you'll have time to let Ezra cool off, and you can try to gradually convince him that having another kid in the family wouldn't be the end of the world."

"What if I can't convince him?"

"Then..." He sighs heavily. "I guess you're gonna have to decide which of them can handle the disappointment better. I mean, Ezra has been through hell. And that hell was related to having a new baby in the family. It's not like you can blame him for reacting this way. But you also don't want him thinking that he can act out and get his way whenever you do something he doesn't like."

"I just don't want him to think that I'm not taking his feelings into consideration. And right now, that's exactly what he thinks."

"Well hopefully getting Tommy onboard with putting the baby plans on hold for a while will help prove to Ez that you do care."

It sounds so simple when he says it like that. But it still doesn't feel simple from where I'm sitting. Even though asking Tommy to be okay with waiting a while isn't as bad as asking him to give up on the idea of having a baby entirely, it's still going to upset him. And the fact that I can't tell him how long we'll have to wait isn't going to help at all.

How am I supposed to put a time limit on it, though? What if I say a month, and then a month isn't long enough? What if six months isn't long enough? What if nothing I say or do changes Ezra's mind? Am I just supposed to say, "Oh well, time's up, we're having a baby whether you like it or not!"?

Or am I supposed to tell Tommy that it's just not going to happen?

And what if this is some kind of deal breaker for him? I don't think it will be, I doubt anything could ever drive a big enough wedge between us to ever cause any permanent damage. But I didn't think that Ezra was going to react this badly to the prospect of us having another baby, either. I was worried that he wouldn't be happy about it, but I never expected him to shut down the way he did today. If I was wrong about that, there's a chance I could be wrong about how Tommy will handle me asking him to delay our plans.

And I'm terrified to find out.

I'm given a temporary reprieve for the rest of the evening while we watch TV and play board games with the kids, but I can tell the whole time that Tommy is struggling to keep himself from pulling me aside. He wants to know what the hell is going on, he deserves to know. And as soon as the kids are tucked in for the night, there's no good reason for me not to answer his questions anymore.

"Are you gonna tell me what happened with you and Ez this afternoon?" He asks, casting a knowing look at me over his shoulder as we descend the stairs together. "Or are you expecting another conveniently timed phone call?"

Damn.

He knows me way too well.
"I'm sorry-"

"Don't be sorry, just tell me what the fuck is going on between you two. Did you have a fight or something?"

"Not exactly." I mumble, making a beeline for the refrigerator as soon as we step into the kitchen, and grabbing us both a beer. He accepts the bottle from me, but he places it on the kitchen island beside him without opening it. His eyes never leave my face. He's definitely not messing around. "I'm worried about him."

"What do you mean?"

"The way he's been acting towards me lately, and the things he said to me today... it's all a little too familiar."

He shakes his head faintly, and I feel his impatient demeanor soften almost instantly. "It's nowhere near as bad as it was when you guys first moved here."

"I just don't want to hurt him again."

"What do you mean?"

"The way he's been acting towards me lately, and the things he said to me today... it's all a little too familiar."

He shakes his head faintly, and I feel his impatient demeanor soften almost instantly. "It's nowhere near as bad as it was when you guys first moved here."

"I just don't want to hurt him again." I sigh, leaning against the counter behind me. "He's been doing so well the past couple of years, but ever since we told him that we're having a baby it's like he's gone back to the way he was before. Around me, at least. He's scared, and upset... and I think he feels like everything is going to get messed up again."

"And I get why he'd think that, but it's not gonna happen." Protests Tommy adamantly. "This is totally different-"

"I know that, and you know that... and maybe deep down he knows it, too. But right now he doesn't believe it."

"So like... what're we supposed to do? I mean, we can keep telling him that it's not gonna be like it was last time, that no one's gonna get hurt, that it's not gonna change everything, but we can't make him believe it."

"I know."

It's like I can feel the next sentence that I need to say lodged somewhere in my throat. There's a voice in my head repeatedly telling me to just do it, just get it over with. It's not fair to Tommy for me to put it off for even a second longer than I already have. But the longer I stand here with him, the longer I spend looking into his curious and concerned eyes, the harder it gets. My mouth is dry, my tongue feels like sandpaper, I try to swallow but those words stuck in my throat make it painful to do.

I guess the struggle and the guilt must be written all over my face, because it's not long before I'm watching the realization of what I'm not saying dawn on him.

"You don't wanna have a baby anymore?" He asks quietly, as though he can't believe he even needs to say the words, he can't believe I would do this to him.

"I do."

I assure him wholeheartedly, reaching out and taking his hand in mine. "I swear I do. But... maybe we should just slow down for a while, you know? Things have been moving really fast since we decided to do this, and we're not giving the kids a chance to let it all sink in. If we just give them some time-"

"How much time?"

"I..."
I can't even look at him right now. I feel like I'm doing something incredibly cruel, taking something from him that I'd only just promised him he could have. But the hurt and disappointment in his eyes isn't all that different from what I saw in Ezra's eyes this afternoon.

How am I supposed to choose who to hurt? Because that's the only choice I really have here.

"A few months... maybe?" I eventually manage to respond, begging him with everything I have to agree to this, to let it be okay. "Just until Ezra starts to come around a little."

For the longest time, he doesn't say a word. He doesn't look shocked, or angry, or confused. Only disheartened. He stares at his unopened beer, unblinking and unmoving, as I wait with baited breath for his reply... until finally I see him begin to nod. It's barely perceptible, but I'm sure I'm not imagining it.

And then suddenly that small sign of agreement becomes something else. He's no longer nodding, he's shaking his head. And I feel my heart drop to my stomach with dread as he pulls his hand out of my grasp.

"I asked you..." He begins, his voice unsteady. "After we told the kids that we wanted to have a baby, and they were all pissed about it, I asked you if you were sure you still wanted to do this."

"I was sure. I-"

"I gave you an out. You should've fucking done this before we even got started. But you said you still wanted to go through with it no matter what the kids said. I mean... fuck, we chose an egg donor already, we're supposed to be choosing a surrogate."

"I know and I'm sorry. But after everything Ezra said to me this afternoon, I can't-"

"He's a kid, Taylor!" He snaps at me in frustration. "Yeah, he's scared and he's upset. He's been through a lot, and some of that's on us, and I feel like shit about that, I really do. But that doesn't mean we should let him decide whether or not we can have a baby!"

"I'm not saying we're not gonna have a baby at all! I just want to give him a little more time to-"

"What if a few months doesn't change anything? Then what?"

I knew he was going to ask me this question, no matter how desperately I hoped that he wouldn't. I just wish I had any kind of answer for him. "I... I don't know."

"Are we just never gonna do it? Or do you wanna wait six years until he leaves for college?"

"I don't know! All I know is that... I don't wanna hurt him again."

He holds my pleading stare in silence for a moment, and all I want to do is pull him nearer and try to comfort him somehow. I doubt he'll let me touch him right now, but I stupidly attempt to do it anyway because I can't not. My hand doesn't even make contact with his arm before he steps out of my reach.

And then he turns and leaves the room.

At first I assume he's going up to our bedroom or down to the movie room, and he probably doesn't want me to follow him. But when I hear the faint sound of keys in the foyer, I take off at a run in the direction of the noise. Tommy already has the front door open when I get there, and when I grab his arm to keep him from walking out on me he irritably shrugs off my grip.
"Let me go."

"Tommy, come on."

"Look, I get it, okay?" He sighs sadly. "You had to make a choice."

"It's not that simple!"

"It doesn't fucking matter how complicated or simple it was; there was a choice and you made it."

"He's my kid." I protest earnestly, imploring him to understand.

The scary thing is, I know he already does.

"And I love him, too. I don't wanna hurt him, I don't wanna hurt any of them. I'm not saying you made the wrong choice, Taylor. But I can't just pretend like I'm totally fine with it, like it doesn't fucking matter to me one way or the other..." He shrugs helplessly before pulling the door open even further and beginning to turn his back on me. "I can't."

"Where are you going?"

"I don't know."

I follow him out onto the front steps of the house, my heart pounding so hard in my chest that it feels like each beat might actually break it. "When will you be back?"

The lights on his car flash to life when he presses the button on his keys to unlock it. "Later."

"Tommy-"

"Just let me fucking have this!" He demands emotionally as he irritably yanks open the driver's side door. "I need to not be here right now. Don't you get that?"

I do.

I hate that he feels this way, that he needs to get away from me rather than letting me be here for him. But I understand why he can't be around me right now; I more or less betrayed him. And if space from me is what he needs in order to deal with his disappointment, then it's the least I can give him after what I just took from him.

Watching him get into his car and pull out of the driveway hurts like hell, but I can't make myself move until he's gone. And even then, all I can do is step back into the house, close the front door behind me, and collapse against it in exhaustion. I squeeze my eyes shut, silently telling myself that it's going to be okay, that he'll come back when he's had time to come to terms with everything, and that the best thing I can do for both of us and our kids is to stay calm and try to get some sleep.

But it's kinda hard to hear that rational voice over all of the screaming that my anxiety is doing.

"Dad?"

My eyes fly open in surprise to find Ezra standing on the staircase on the other side of the room, frowning at me with worry. "I thought you were asleep. What're you doing up?"

"I was going to the bathroom. I heard you and Tommy yelling at each other."

Shit. "Sorry, buddy. We didn't mean to wake you-"
"You didn't, I was already awake."

"Well... you should probably go back to bed. You've got school tomorrow." I tell him as lightly as I can, forcing a reassuring smile as I make my way over to the stairs. "I think I'm gonna head up, too."

"Where'd Tommy go?"

"I... he just... needed to get out of the house for a while."

It obvious he's not buying it; he's studying me so closely that I feel guilty even looking him in the eyes. "When's he coming back?"

"Soon." I hope. "He'll come back when he's ready."

"He never leaves when you guys fight... it must've been pretty bad."

"We weren't... it wasn't really a fight. It was just..." What the hell was it? "I said something and it upset him. But he'll feel better when he's had some time to think about it."

Placing my hand on Ezra's shoulder, I try to gently guide him upstairs with me. But we barely make it three steps before I feel him resisting. "What choice did you make?"

"What?"

"When you guys were arguing, Tommy said that you made a choice. Was he mad because of the choice you made?"

"Yeah. Kind of."

Kind of completely.

"So... what choice did you make that he's so mad about?"

"I...

Why is it so hard to know when I should tell the truth and when it's better to lie? If I tell him the truth, it'll probably make him feel bad. But if I lie, and he can tell I'm lying, it'll probably make him even more mad at my than he already is.

A middle ground would be nice right about now.

"I decided that it would be better if we waited a while..." I explain awkwardly. "To have a baby."

I'm expecting him to keep questioning me about the whats and the whys of my fight with Tommy, but instead he simply follows me upstairs without another word. I tell him goodnight again before we part ways and retreat to our separate bedrooms. And as soon as the door has closed behind me, I pretty much just want to sink down onto the floor right where I'm standing. I'm not even sure that I have the energy to walk across the room and get into bed.

Honestly, even if I had the energy, I'm almost dreading getting into bed. I already know I'm not going to get any sleep tonight. How can I? I don't know where my husband is. I don't know when he's coming home. And I don't know how long it's going to take him to forgive me. It doesn't matter if he understands why I made this choice, it doesn't even matter if he believes it was the right choice.

It hurt him.
And when something hurts you the way this hurt him, no amount of reason makes it feel any less shitty. Knowing it was justified or necessary doesn't make it any easier to accept. The only thing you can do is wait and hope that eventually you will be able to accept it, and then maybe it won't feel so shitty anymore.

After sitting on the floor for almost an hour, I force myself back up onto my feet and drag myself over to the bed. My whole body aches, and all I want to do is close my eyes and go to sleep, but my mind won't slow down and shut up. I can't stop myself from checking the clock on my nightstand every five minutes, and every time I see how late it is, I feel a little worse. I keep thinking back to the argument we had two weeks ago, when he said he was going to sleep in the movie room but he eventually came back up to bed with me.

I'm waiting for the door to open, for him to come over here and curl up against me and let me apologize. But I don't think he's going to.

Not tonight.

It's sometime around four am when I finally fall asleep. At least, that's the last time I remember seeing on the clock. One minute it's four, and the next it's seven am and my alarm is blaring. Usually I'd get out of bed and go straight to the bathroom to take a shower, but this morning my instinct is to check every room in the house for any sign of Tommy. I start with Asta's room, since that's where I found him the last time he disappeared for hours and came home in the middle of the night. But she's sleeping soundly and he's nowhere to be found.

He's nowhere.

Not in the movie room or the studio or the family room or the kitchen. And when I check the driveway (which probably would have been my first stop if I felt at all capable of thinking clearly), his car is still gone.

He never came home.

As soon as I realize that he's not here, I make a mad dash back up to the bedroom to find my phone and check for any texts or voicemails. I already know there won't be any; I'm sure if I'd gotten any they would have woken me up. But I'm still disappointed to see that I'm right. I immediately try to call him but it goes straight through to his voicemail, which means he either turned his phone off or the battery died. Either way, I can't contact him. I can't ask him where he is, if he's okay, if he's coming home soon...

Any minute now our kids are going to wake up and want to know where he is. And I'm going to have to lie to them and act like everything is fine when in reality I'm going out of my fucking mind!

Just as I expected, none of them have even taken a bite of their breakfast before they're interrogating me about why I haven't made any food for Tommy. I chance a look at Ezra, willing him not to contradict me when I tell his little brothers and sisters that Tommy had a really early appointment at the dentist this morning. They all seem to buy the excuse, and thankfully Ezra keeps his mouth shut and lets them believe the lie. But I can tell that he's even more worried about what's going on between us now than he was last night.

And he's not the only one.
I should've known this would happen.

I wanted it too much, and it actually looked like it was gonna pan out, so of course it was all about to go to shit.

*How* did I not see this coming? I'm so fucking stupid. With the way things have been going for me this year, I don't know why I thought this would turn out any differently. I know I'm being melodramatic, sitting here wallowing in self-pity. But I think I fucking earned that right! It feels like things are being taken from me everywhere I turn, even if in reality I know it's only been my job. And now this baby.

*Only...*

It's not like those were small things to lose, not for me. And losing them has left me lacking in other things. Confidence, possibility, hope.

And now what the fuck am I supposed to do? Just get over it and pretend like I never wanted it all that badly? I don't know if I can do that this time. I did it when I lost my job with Adam; I acted like it was fine and I was over it even when I wasn't. Until eventually I (mostly) was. But this is different. Even if I could somehow put on a convincing enough act to fool Taylor into believing that I'm fine with this, *I'll* still know how I really feel.

That's why I had to get the hell out of that house. If I'd stayed, he would have spent all night apologizing to me and trying to explain things to me. And I don't need that. I don't *want* that. He
doesn't have anything to apologize for, and I already understand why it has to be this way. But just because I understand it, that doesn't make it feel any less like a loss. And if he'd kept on at me about it, trying to make me feel better before I've even had time to fully feel like shit, I would've totally blown up at him and everything would've been a hundred times worse than it already is.

As masochistic as it sounds, I need to feel like shit right now. If I don't, if I just push it away and pretend it's not there, it's only gonna come back and bite us both in the ass later.

I just wish I had somewhere to go...

I can't go to Lisa's or my mom's, they'll just badger me with questions about why I can't go home. Same with Alex; he'll try to talk me into going back and making up with Taylor. Isaac is off in fucking Napa with AWOLNATION, and I'd feel like a total dick going to Holden and Ryan. They're dealing with their own shit right now. They don't need me bitching about the fact that Taylor is indefinitely pausing our plans to have a baby while they're getting over the disappointment of their first IVF attempt failing.

I know I have other friends I could go to, outside of the small circle that Taylor and I share, but honestly... I haven't really spent a whole lot of time with any of them in months. It'd be kind of a douche move to show up on someone's doorstep in the middle of the night and be like, "hey, sorry I haven't made any effort to hang out with you in forever, but can I sleep on your couch?"

I never wanted to be this guy. This family focused loser who neglects his friendships and gives up on his career so he can chauffeur his kids to soccer practice and ballet classes. A guy who would rather spend every night in front of the TV snuggling with his significant other instead of out at a bar or hanging at a friend's house. I was always so adamant that I'd never let this happen to me, that I'd never "settle down".

Hell, it's not unfair to say that the idea of it fucking terrified me.

And then I fell in love.

My whole world became about Taylor and the kids, and somewhere along the way it started to feel like my role in their lives defined me. And I was actually totally okay with that. I wasn't afraid of it anymore, it became safe and comfortable. I felt like I had a purpose, a reason to exist. I was finally where I was meant to be, and everything would be okay if I just stayed there.

I guess trying to change it, even just by bringing another kid into the family, messed everything up. If it's not broke, don't fix it, right? I should've just been grateful for what I had. But no, I had to go and fuck with it by wanting more. There was nothing wrong with the way things were, and if I hadn't gotten so hooked on the idea of having this baby, none of this would've happened. I'd be at home right now in our bed, not sitting in my parked car at some random overlook on Mulholland.

Looking out at the endless sea of lights below me, I begin to feel increasingly lost and alone. I'm staring at a city full of people... and it only makes it clearer to me that I have nowhere to go, and no one to go to.

And that's my own fucking fault.

Eventually, I force myself to start the car and finish the winding drive through Laurel Canyon and down to West Hollywood. Almost as soon as I turn onto Santa Monica Boulevard, the bright red 'vacancy' sign of a nearby motel catches my eye and I pull into the parking lot out front as though I'm on autopilot. It feels weird to be paying money for a motel room in a city that I live in. But the idea of spending the night lying on some ugly ass bedspread is more appealing to me right now than going
home. I needed somewhere I could go to feel shitty, and this place looks like it was built for the job.

It doesn't hurt that there's a store right across the street where I can pick up a bottle of Jack to keep me company.

It's not until I'm about halfway through the bottle that I start to question whether or not drinking was a good idea. I never really know what alcohol is going to do to my mood when I'm down. It could either improve it or amplify it, but there's no way to tell until it's too late.

Tonight it's the latter.

I'm my own worst critic and worst enemy under normal circumstances. So when I'm going through a hard time, I basically want to hang myself just to get my own thoughts to leave me the fuck alone. No matter how much I try to argue with that malicious voice in my head, it won't stop bitching at me until it convinces me that I'm the \textit{worst} person on the planet. I'm selfish, I'm ungrateful, I'm thoughtless, I'm mean, I'm pathetic, I'm stupid, I'm talentless, I'm a failure, I'm just plain fucking \textit{wrong}.

I know it's lying. About some of it, at least. I know it's not selfish of me to want to have a baby with the guy I love. No more selfish than him wanting to have a family and a career. And I \textit{don't} consider that selfish. But I'm the exception to every rule I apply to everyone else in my life. It's okay for them to want more, for them to continue to grow, and change, and move forward. But me? Fuck no! I'm not allowed to move forward. I'm not allowed to move \textit{at all}. I should be thankful for what I already have and focus on not losing it. Any sudden movement on my part could bring it all crashing down around me.

Isn't this whole shitty situation just proof of that?

But what if I \textit{can't} stay still? What if never moving an inch while everyone around me is busy chasing their dreams eventually leaves me feeling nothing but bitter and resentful? \textit{Why} am I the exception? \textit{Why} aren't I allowed to want more without it making me a terrible person?

What the fuck is wrong with me?

That's the last thought I can recall floating around my head right before I pass out.

It's strange waking up in a room that I don't recognize. Our bedroom at home is light and open, and this motel room is dark and cramped. Usually the first thing I see when I roll over in bed in the morning is Taylor. Today it's a flat, uncomfortable looking pillow, and what's left of my drinking buddy sitting on the nightstand. I grab my phone to see what time it is and check for any calls or texts, momentarily forgetting that the fucking battery died before I fell asleep last night. I feel a pang of disappointment as I stare at the black screen, because it means I can't just send a text to let Taylor know that I'm still alive. I'm going to have to go home, and I'm honestly not sure if I'm ready yet. I don't really feel any better now than I did when I left last night. My emotions might be more subdued, but they're still there. If I go home, I'm going to have to act like everything's normal. And with all of these thoughts still tearing me to pieces, I don't think I can do that.

I roll off of the creaky, lumpy mattress, grabbing my wallet and keys before heading to a cafe across the street to get some coffee. My caffeine consumption has definitely increased since I moved in with Taylor (it's nowhere near his level, though). Freshly brewed coffee is one of the first things I smell every morning when I head down for breakfast, it's a smell I've come to associate with home and with him. That's usually a good thing, it's calming and comforting. But on rare occasions like this morning, when we're in the middle of a fight, or he's out of town, or something just isn't right, the smell of coffee makes me miserable. I've barely opened the door to the cafe before the scent of
ground coffee beans hits me like a punch in the face.

So I turn around and walk right back out again.

When I get into my car I suddenly remember that I have an iPhone charger cable in the glove compartment, so I can charge my phone while I'm driving. If I believed in a higher power I'd be thanking it right about now, because now I can text Taylor and I don't have to go home yet. I still have time to figure out what I want to say to him before I see him.

But I have no idea how long that's going to take me.

Since it's no longer the middle of the night, I feel like I can get away with calling a friend and asking if they wanna get together for lunch or something. Inviting someone out for lunch after not speaking to them for months is totally different from asking them to let you crash on their couch, no questions asked. In fact, if I did shit like this more often, maybe I actually would have had someone to reach out to last night.

It takes me an hour or so of calling people and having that awkward "how've you been" conversation before I give up on finding someone who isn't working or doesn't already have plans. But despite my failure to find company, I still feel a little better. I figure that at least I made contact with like five people I hadn't really spoken to since Christmas. I made an effort and hopefully put myself back on their radars. So maybe next time they're looking for someone to get a drink with or see a movie with, they'll shoot a text my way.

I'm in the middle of trying to decide what the hell to do for the rest of the day when my phone starts ringing, and I'm pleasantly surprised when I look down at the screen and see Isaac's face and caller ID.

"Hey stranger."

"Hey Beb, what's up?"

"Not much. How's-"

"Liar!" He accuses abruptly, leaving me momentarily speechless. "If 'not much' was going on, your husband wouldn't have texted me first thing this morning asking me if I'd heard from you."

Ugh. Damnit, Taylor! "My battery died. I already texted him to let him know I'm okay."

"I know. He texted me again to tell me that you were fine before I'd even woken up and read the other text. But he didn't explain why he needed to ask me if I'd heard from you."

"It's a long story-"

"Yeah, well it's my day off. I already had like three glasses of wine before lunch, and my only plan for the afternoon is to drink three more glasses of wine before dinner." He informs me in an unmistakable 'don't fuck with me' tone. "I'm not in any kind of hurry here, so start talkin'."

"I just... I kinda walked out on him last night." I sigh wearily, slumping in my seat as I watch the cars rushing by outside. All these people have somewhere to go and something to do; they have ambition and motivation and passion. Or maybe they just have a shitty job to get to, which is still more than I have. I'm just sitting here in my parked car on the side of the road like a fucking loser. "It was stupid. I was upset, and I freaked out a little, and I felt like I needed to get the fuck out of the house before it got any worse."
"But you didn't tell him where you were going?"

"I didn't know where I was going."

"It must've been a pretty bad fight for you to drive off in the middle of the night and leave him texting your friends to find out where you went."

"It wasn't even really a fight." I explain, shaking my head sadly and wondering how it all got so screwed up so quickly. "I mean... I guess it was... I don't know."

I hear Isaac sigh heavily on the other end of the line, and I can't help but smile faintly as I picture his expression. I know exactly what kind of look he'd be giving me right now. He manages to pull off the whole incredulous yet sympathetic thing so well.

"Was there yelling?"

"A little."

"Yelling generally goes hand in hand with fighting."

"I don't even know why we were fighting, though! He wasn't wrong to do what he did. But... I wasn't wrong to be upset about it, either. I don't know, everything's so fucking messed up."

"You're gonna have to elaborate a little." He prods gently. "What did he do and why wasn't it wrong?"

"He told me he thinks we should wait a few months before we do the whole surrogacy thing, because he wants to give the kids time to get used to the idea first."

"Okay... that's reasonable. But how come he's just figuring that out now?"

"Cause Ezra's only just started to seriously kick up a fuss about it. None of them were all that happy about the idea when we told them, but Ezra's like really against it. To the point where he's got Taylor thinking that everything between them could end up being as bad as it was when they moved here."

"Well... shit." Mutters Isaac quietly.

"Yup."

"So that's it, then? You guys are putting the baby thing on hold until Ezra gets over it? If he gets over it."

"I guess. I don't know what else to do. I don't wanna push Taylor into doing it if he doesn't feel right about it, and I don't wanna upset Ezra any more than Taylor does. But..."

"I know."

He really does know. I don't even have to say it. He was the first and only person I confided in when Taylor and I decided to start the surrogacy process. He saw how excited and anxious I was, he celebrated with me and assured me that everything would go great.

He couldn't have known that only a couple of weeks later we'd be having this conversation.

I sure as hell didn't.

Spending another half an hour on the phone with Isaac gives my mood a further boost and helps me
organize my thoughts a little more. And listening to him talking about his latest few shows and the upcoming tour he's going on is a very welcome distraction from all of my bullshit. Even if I am a little jealous.

Almost as soon as we've said our goodbyes, my phone starts ringing with yet another call. This time it's one of my ex-roommates showing up on the caller ID, and it takes me several seconds to answer the call because I'm so taken aback by the fact that he's calling me out of the blue.

The reason for his call comes as an even bigger shock than the call itself, and yet somehow it feels like exactly what I've been waiting for, whether I was aware of it or not.

When it's time to pick Asta up from pre-school, it's like my body knows it. I guess I've been doing it for so long that I've developed some kind of internal alarm clock that goes off regardless of where I am or what I'm doing. I know that I could just text Taylor and tell him to pick her up, but there's really no reason for me not to go and get her myself. I can't keep avoiding him forever, I don't want to. Besides, it's not fair to him or the kids for me to stay away any longer than I already have. So I send him a text telling him that I'm on my way to get her and I'll see him at home.

Picking Asta up is almost always one of the best parts of my day. Any day. Yeah, sometimes she's cranky and difficult, or she's in the middle of something and doesn't want to leave, so I end up spending twenty minutes sitting on the floor while she plays with plastic dinosaurs. And getting her out of the classroom is never a guarantee that the worst is over, because sometimes she insists on opening her lunchbox halfway to the parking lot and emptying every last container out of it so that she can retrieve the one grape she didn't eat at lunch... but most days she's just excited to see me. It doesn't matter if I'm in a pissy mood the entire drive to her pre-school, as soon as I get out of the car and see her running around on the playground, whatever I was pissed about escapes my mind completely.

Today is no different. The second she sees me, she ditches whatever disorganized game it was that she was playing with her friends and makes a beeline for the playground gate. She's practically climbing the damn thing by the time I get to it, so instead of opening it I reach out and lift her over it first. Apparently this is going to be an easy pick up day, because she insists that I'm not allowed to put her down. Not while I'm talking to her teacher about how her day went, or signing her out, or getting her lunchbox from her classroom. Not until we're back at the car and she has to get into her car seat.

I guess this is what happens when I'm unexpectedly absent for an entire day.

We arrive home just as Taylor pulls the minivan into the driveway, and I can tell simply by looking at him that all he wants to do is come over and hug me before he's even unlocked the car door to let the kids out. But I also know he's not going to, because that would clue them in to the fact that something is wrong.

It's supposed to be a normal Monday evening, so that's exactly how we behave. Jenna gets home from her second job and helps the kids with their homework for a while, Taylor makes dinner, and I hang out in the family room with Asta and try to help her build a castle out of LEGO DUPLO bricks. Apparently my help isn't all that helpful, though, because she removes every brick I place and puts it somewhere else. But at least she's kind enough to explain to me why everything I do is wrong (even if it still makes absolutely no fucking sense to me).

It's not until after dinner, when the kids are all preoccupied with their chosen activities for the evening, that Taylor and I find ourselves alone for the first time in almost twenty-four hours. I help him carry the dishes into the kitchen, and as soon as we've set them down by the sink he turns to me and pulls me into a hug so tight that I can barely move my arms to hug him back.
"I'm so sorry." He mumbles against my shoulder. "I never wanted to hurt you-"

"I know."

"I was so worried about you."

I squeeze my eyes shut and bury my face in his t-shirt, breathing him in and trying to remember why the hell I ever walked out on him. *This* feels so much better. "I shouldn't have left like that."

"It's okay." He tells me sincerely. "You needed some time to deal with everything, and that's *totally* fair."

"But I should've handled it differently. I should've called you when I knew I wasn't coming home last night, I didn't mean to just leave you wondering where the fuck I'd gone."

"Where *did* you go?" He frowns as he pulls back a little to look me in the eyes, gently combing some hair away from my face. "Did you stay with a friend or something?"

"No, I just... I drove around for a while, and then I ended up at some crappy motel in West Hollywood."

I can see the guilt in his eyes as he lets my answer sink in, and then he wraps his arms around me protectively again. "I'm sorry you felt like you couldn't come home."

"It's not your fault."

"Yes it is." He protests insistently. "You didn't want to be around me-"

"I didn't wanna be around *me.*" I correct him, earning myself another look of confusion and concern. "Apparently it doesn't matter how many fucking times I try to do it, I never learn that I can't run away from my own thoughts."

"What thoughts were you trying to run away from?"

A bitter breath of laughter escapes me before I can suppress it, and I shake my head as I look away from his inquisitive gaze. "You don't wanna know."

"Were they thoughts about us?"

"No, just... thoughts about me. About who I am, and what I am... and what I'm not."

He looks even more worried now than he did before, and I feel like I'm totally fucking up in my efforts to explain myself to him. "What do you mean? Is there something you think you should be that you think you're not? Or something you are that you don't want to be?"

"Both." I answer as honestly as I can. "Don't get me wrong, I love our life, and I love you and the kids more than *anything*... but it's like I love you so much that all I care about is what you want, and what they need... it's more important to me than what *I* want or need. I'm starting to feel like... like I've forgotten myself, I guess. I barely have a life outside of the life we have together. I haven't put any effort into having one because I got so comfortable with how things are and the routine we have, I didn't care if I had anything else. But... it's not good for me."

"What're you trying to say?"

"Ever since I lost my job with Adam, I've been trying to figure out what I want to do next. And it's like I keep second guessing myself and stalling 'cause I have no fucking idea what to do or how to
even start. The only thing that feels right to me anymore is us, but... I need something else, something that has nothing to do with us. Like you have the band, you know? That's your thing. I don't have \textit{anything} like that anymore."

"But you could!" He declares quickly, the fear painfully obvious in his unsteady voice. "You can do whatever you want, I would \textit{never} stop you from doing something that makes you happy, you \textit{know} that."

I nod slowly as I take a deep breath and try to prepare myself for what I need to say next. "You remember Dave? My old roommate?"

"Yeah, kind of... why?"

"He called me this afternoon. It was totally random, I haven't spoken to him in forever, but... there's this band that his old band used to open for sometimes when they played local shows. And he's still good friends with them and... anyway, I guess their bassist had some kind of accident or something this weekend and broke a bunch of fingers, and they need someone to stand in for him for a while. Dave mentioned me to them and sent them a few links to some videos of me playing and stuff. I guess they liked what they saw, 'cause they wanted to meet me."

He smiles proudly. "That's awesome! You haven't played a show in months, I think it'll be good for you to-"

"They're heading out on tour a week from today." I cut him off, giving him a moment to let what I've just told him fully register before I continue. And when I feel his anxious grip on my arms start to loosen, I know I need to tell him the full story before he gets too lost in his own thoughts to hear it. "It's just a three week thing... like fifteen shows. The first one is in Hollywood on Saturday, so I'm gonna have to rehearse with them every day this week if I wanna be anything even close to ready-"

"But we're supposed to leave for Tulsa in a couple of weeks."

"I know. I figure you and the kids can go and get settled in and everything, and I'll meet you there when the tour ends."

"So... you're definitely gonna do it?"

"I told them I would." I admit remorsefully. "I'm sorry, I know it was a dick move not talking it out with you first, but they needed an answer, and I didn't want them to pass and find someone else. I think I \textit{need} this. I just... I feel like things keep slipping through my fingers-"

"Tommy-"

"I don't want you to be one of them. I \textit{can't} lose you, but I'm fucking terrified that if I don't do \textit{something}, if I can't get myself out of this rut, I'm gonna become someone I don't wanna be. Someone you won't wanna be with."

I don't think he's ever looked at me the way he's looking at me right now. I can't even define what I see in his eyes, I just know that I wish it wasn't there. I wish I hadn't put it there. Nothing I've said to him is untrue, though. If anything I've buffered my feelings to spare his. I can't take any of it back.

"I will \textit{never} not want to be with you." He finally replies, but when I open my mouth to tell him that he can't know that, and that he can't talk me out of this, he continues. "But if you feel like this is something you need to do for \textit{you}... after everything you've done to support me, there's \textit{no} way I'm
not gonna support you."

The relief doesn't just wash over me, it hits me like a fucking ten foot wave. I feel as though I practically collapse against him, wrapping my arms around him and holding on with every bit of strength I have left. And he holds on to me as though I might disappear if he doesn't.

But that's exactly why I have to do this.

If we want to hold on to what we have, I think we need to let go first.
Chapter 12

Mere minutes after Tommy had broken the news of his plans to leave on tour, I got a phone call from Holden asking if he and Ryan were still welcome to come over and get drunk. I almost told him that it wasn't the best time, but before I could actually say the words, I realized how wrong I was. It was the perfect time; they needed to numb their emotions with tequila, and so did we. So once the kids were in bed, the four of us broke out the Patron and spent the rest of the night commiserating each other on our various losses.

I think it helped all of us to feel heard, understood, and a lot less alone in our melancholy.

Unfortunately, for me and Tommy, the worst part wasn't over. We still had to tell the kids that he was going to be leaving for three weeks, which is by far the longest they've spent away from either of us in years. I was mostly concerned about how Asta and Viggo would take it. I was sure that their older siblings would be sad, but I was just as sure that they would handle the news relatively well. And I was right. Penny was disappointed, River was pretty indignant that we had "lied" to them when we'd said that neither of us would be going anywhere until the fall. And Ezra was... silent. Verbally, at least. The concern that I saw in his eyes before he averted them to the tabletop betrayed his unaffected exterior.

Viggo was horrified by the idea, begging Tommy to change his mind and "quit his job", and Asta reacted as though we'd told her that he was up and leaving her that very minute. She cried unrelentingly, no matter how many times he reassured her that he would be back and that everything would be okay. She basically fell asleep sobbing in his arms on the couch. And even after she had passed out, and her tears had dried, her body would still shake with residual sadness every time she drew a shuddering, unsteady breath.

I don't think I've seen him look so guilty since the last time he had to leave them to go on tour. Back then, Asta was too young to realize what was happening. Viggo threw a fit, but she didn't shed a tear. And even though it made him feel terrible to see Viggo in such distress that day, I know it was worse for him to watch Asta go through it this time. He never blatantly plays favorites with the kids, but it's undeniable that his bond with Asta is different than the one he shares with his brothers and sister. It always has been. And they both took his imminent departure extremely hard.
After he'd carefully carried her upstairs and tucked her into her bed, he told me that he'd changed his mind. He said he'd made a mistake, it had been an impulsive decision that he'd made when he wasn't thinking clearly, and he couldn't go. And as much as I wanted to just nod and tell him that it was his decision and I would support him either way, to let him throw in the towel after only one day of rehearsals, to let him stay... I couldn't.

I knew he needed to go.

He needs to get away from everyone and everything and figure out what the hell it is he really wants. He can't do that here, there's too much in the way, too many distractions. He deserves the chance to clear his head and get back to doing what he loves. I've watched him struggling for months, I even told Alex that sometimes I felt like Tommy was sinking right in front of me and there was nothing I could do about it. If I'd talked him into staying, or if I hadn't talked him out of it, it would have been the equivalent of holding his head under the water.

So I reminded him of what he'd said to me the night before, about needing to go, and being afraid of becoming someone he didn't want to be. And even though he shook his head as though nothing I was saying was registering at all, I could tell that he was hearing me.

As hard as it's going to be, for all of us, it's the right thing to do.

This past week has been one of the most challenging we've had in months. Maybe years. But it has also been filled with glimmers of hope that things will be better once all of this is over. Tommy has been at rehearsals every day, from just after breakfast until just before dinner, so I've been driving all of the kids to and from school, and I've been taking care of everything at home, too. But I guess I should get used to it, because by this time tomorrow, I won't even have his help with getting them up in the morning and putting them to bed at night.

Last night was the first show of the tour. They played the House of Blues on Sunset, and it went about as smoothly as can be expected after such a condensed rehearsal period. Honestly, their music isn't really my thing. I think it's a lot closer to the music Tommy used to make with the bands he was in before he met Adam. But even though I won't be blasting their songs on my iPod anytime soon, I can still appreciate a well executed performance. And watching my husband do one of the things he does best was especially easy to appreciate. The crowd seemed more than satisfied with the show, too. I was probably the only person who noticed how tense Tommy was (because I was probably the only person paying such close attention to every move he made... or didn't make).

I can never take my eyes off of him when he's playing, whether he's on a stage in front of a crowd of people, or in the studio alone.

Several of Tommy's friends, including Isaac, Sophie, and Dave, showed up to see him play. I think the fact that there were so many familiar faces in the audience actually made him more nervous. But I know he was grateful that they were all there to support him, and when we all went out to grab a late night snack at one of his favorite restaurants after the show he was the happiest I've seen him in a long time. He seemed lighter, I guess. More like the laidback guy he was when we first met rather than the responsible family man he's been for the last few years.

I love both of those sides of him equally; how can I not? I fell completely and irrevocably for one of them, and committed the rest of my life to the other. But... I'll admit that it was a little nerve-wracking to see brief glimpses of who he was before. Before he ever told me he loved me, and moved in with me, and found his place in my kid's lives. I know nothing can undo all of that, but some irrational part of my mind was freaking out about the possibility anyway.

Tonight he has a show in San Diego. It's the last within driving distance; they head up to San
Francisco first thing tomorrow morning. And after that I won't see him again for a torturously long twenty-two days. 

It took a lot of brainstorming (and a little arguing), but we finally figured out how tonight is going to play out. I wanted to go to San Diego with him, because I never pass up the opportunity to watch him play, but also because I don't want to waste any of the time we have left together. But that would have meant that we'd either have to wake the kids up at dawn tomorrow to say goodbye to him (which is a horrible idea, because they're always more emotional when they're sleepy), or he'd have to say goodbye before heading to the show, and then I would have to ditch them to go down there and be with him. It wasn't fair to them for us both to disappear at once.

If he was going to leave, I was going to have to stay.

Eventually we decided that he would say goodbye to the kids before leaving, get a ride down to San Diego with Isaac, and then have Isaac drive him back here later tonight after the show. That way we at least get to spend a handful of hours alone together before he has to catch a cab downtown and meet the rest of the band on their way up to San Francisco tomorrow morning.

It's not often that we ask Jenna to work much on weekends anymore. We might ask her to babysit on a Saturday night, but other than that the two of us usually have it covered. This weekend I asked her to work both days. I needed her yesterday so that I could go to the Hollywood show, and I'm going to need all the help I can get in a few minutes when Tommy walks out that door and Asta has a total meltdown.

"Okay, so what's the plan?" She asks me in a near whisper as we stand just outside the family room and make sure that none of the kids can escape long enough to see Tommy bring his favorite bass guitar up from the studio and take it out to Isaac's car. "Is there a plan?"

"Hug them a lot. And repeatedly tell them that it's only three weeks."

"Right."

"And remind them that this time next week they'll be in Tulsa with their cousins. Hopefully that'll take their minds off of how much this sucks."

She nods as she takes a deep breath, and then she laughs softly to herself as she exhales. "For some reason, I didn't think I was ever going to have to do this again."

"Do what?" I frown.

"Try to keep the kids calm when one of you has to leave on tour. It's been so long, and the last time either of you went away for more than a few days, we all came with you. Tommy hasn't been on tour in over two years now, so I guess I just assumed that he was done with it, you know? He seemed so settled."

"Yeah... he did."

"Is everything okay?" She questions carefully as I turn to her, shaking my head in confusion.

"Between you and Tommy, I mean?"

"Of course it is! What makes you ask?"

"I don't know. It's kinda felt like something has been different recently, and then he suddenly decided to do this tour... I was just wondering if there was any reason-"
"No." God, I hope not. "It was only sudden because the guy he's replacing got hurt at the last minute. It's not like he was looking for an excuse to leave or anything. Everything's fine between us. Better than fine."

I can hear the uncertainty in my own voice as I speak, and I can see the pitying look she's giving me. Apparently I didn't do a good job of convincing either of us. I wish I could, because it's hard enough watching him leave without being afraid that he won't come back. And the stupid thing is, I wasn't even slightly afraid of that until now. When he told me he'd taken this job, there was no doubt in my mind that he was doing it for himself and that it wasn't a problem with us that was pushing him to jump on the first tour bus out of town. But I've had a knot in my stomach all morning, and it's only getting bigger and more uncomfortable. I wasn't sure what it was at first, and I wrote it off as nerves and stress. Now there's no doubt in my mind that it's fear.

And nothing I tell myself seems to quell it.

I'm so lost in my own thoughts that I nearly jump out of my skin when Tommy gently places his hand on my shoulder to get my attention. Any other day he'd probably tease me for being overdramatic, or he'd apologize for scaring me and then try to flirt his way back into my good graces. But today he says nothing. He smiles, but it's not a smile of amusement or contentment. Not even close.

"Ready?" He sighs tiredly.

"When you are."

His gaze drifts from my face to the family room, and he watches our kids in silence for a moment. I don't know if he's working up the nerve to start the process of saying goodbye or simply taking it all in one last time. Either way, he doesn't get chance to finish. Viggo looks up from the TV and sees us standing here, and his hasty leap off of the couch is enough to disturb everyone else and draw their attention to us.

"Don't go yet." Pleads Viggo as he throws his arms around Tommy's waist and holds on to him possessively. "Why don't you stay just for lunch and then you can go later?"

"I wish I could, dude, but I have to get down to San Diego and get ready for the show."

"Just a little longer?"

"Even if I stay for a while, it's still gonna suck just as much when I have to leave later." He tells Viggo apologetically as the rest of the kids slowly make their way over. "I'm not gonna be gone for long, okay? It's not like last time, when I was gone for over a month. I'll only be gone for a few weeks."

"And then you'll come meet us in Tulsa for the 4th of July." Penny adds calmly. It's not a question, it's more of a command, and her eyes lock onto Tommy's face, searching for any sign of hesitancy. She's never been afraid to be brazen with him; he encourages it most of the time. He wasn't used to having a kid calling him on his shit, especially not a little girl. She's kept him on his toes since the day they met; she rarely lets him get away with even the smallest of white lies, so most of the time he doesn't even attempt to tell them.

"I'll be there."

"You have to promise."
This time when he smiles it's entirely genuine. It's still small, but it's not quite as sad as it was. "I promise."

She holds his stare, challenging him to look away and reveal his dishonestly. But he doesn't so much a blink, and finally it's enough to win her over. Within seconds he has another set of arms wrapped around him, and then another when River rushes forwards and makes himself comfortable in what little space is left in Tommy's personal bubble. Ezra isn't as eager to get in on the group hug, but Asta starts squirming impatiently in his arms and demanding to be put down. And the second her little feet touch the ground, she runs right over to Tommy and pushes her way past Penny's legs in order to latch on to his.

He doesn't hesitate to sink down amongst them, until he's closer to their level and can at least attempt to hug them all back. I can't figure out if my heart is melting or breaking right now. I think it broke and then the pieces melted. I wish I could put this moment on pause for the next three weeks, so that he never has to leave and they never have to let him go. But I keep reminding myself that there's a reason he has to do this, no matter how much harder it gets to see that reason with every passing second.

Asta continues to cling to his legs even after the others reluctantly release their hold on him. The only one who hasn't hugged him is Ezra, and he shows no sign that he's planning to do so. But it's not hostility or indifference I'm sensing from him right now, if anything I think he feels like he shouldn't try to hug Tommy. We've done our best to reassure the kids that Tommy isn't leaving because of anything they have done, or because he wants to be away from us, and the only one who still doesn't seem to believe us is Ezra. It's not like anyone can blame him for being suspicious. He heard us fighting, he saw Tommy walk out on me, he knows he didn't come home that night.

And now, one week later, he's leaving us.

"You too cool for hugs now?" Tommy teases him in an attempt to ease the tension. "Can I at least get a fist bump or something? Or do you just wanna like nod and say 'later'."

For what feels like the first time in days, a smile starts to spread across Ezra's face, and he takes a few hesitant steps forward. Despite having a three year old hanging off of his leg, Tommy makes the effort to meet Ezra half way, and I'm hit by a wave of relief as the two of them embrace. I actually can't remember when they last hugged; Ezra isn't a big hugger, at least not anymore. And he's had so many growth spurts since his tenth birthday that he's now almost taller than Tommy!

"Take care of your dad, okay?" I hear Tommy tell him semi-seriously. "I'm counting on you to stop him from making any stupid decisions."

"Hey!"

"Like what?" Ezra asks as he and Tommy let go of each other, completely ignoring my indignant protest.

"Like dying his hair black, or adopting a cat, or... buying a new house. You know what he's like."

"Is your opinion of me really that low?" I pout pathetically.

Tommy shakes his head at me before reaching down and picking Asta up. "My opinion of you is ridiculously high. My opinion of your decision making abilities, on the other hand..."

"Whatever. You can go now."

"You know I'm right." He smirks as he walks over to me. "And you know you love me."
I do. God, I do.

And all I want to do right now is grab onto him unashamedly and refuse to let go, exactly the way our daughter has. Even though I know he'll be back tonight, that this isn't our goodbye, I'm still kicking and screaming on the inside. Just like Asta will be in a few seconds when he tries to hand her to me. She's allowed to let her feelings show, they all are. But I'm the grown up (apparently), I'm the parent. So I have to lock my emotions away in a box at the back of my mind in order to help them cope with theirs.

"I gotta go, bug." He murmurs against Asta's ear, and I can see her body tense in his arms. "It's okay, your daddy's right here and I'll be back soon."

"No!"

Our eyes meet, and I can tell without him having to say a word that he needs to get this over with. Because he knows that nothing he says right now is going to soothe her, it's only going to prolong this and make it more painful for both of them.

The second I so much as touch her, she starts screaming so loudly that her older brothers immediately cover their ears. She has every available inch of her little limbs wrapped around Tommy's torso and she's holding on for dear life. I can't hold her and pry her off of him at the same time, and he can only untangle himself from her arms or her legs, but not both at the same time. Eventually Jenna has to step in and help, and as soon as Asta realizes that she's doesn't stand a chance, she stops screaming and starts bawling. Which is somehow even harder to hear.

If Tommy gets too close she'll grab hold of him again, so he grudgingly keeps his distance. He takes her hand in his and kisses it quickly, telling her that he's sorry, and that he loves her. Then he turns to Ezra, Penny, River and Viggo to tell them that he loves them, too.

And then we all watch him leave.

No one says or does anything for what feels like minutes. The only sound in the house is Asta's sobbing and repeated cries for her dad. It's like we're all staring at the door, waiting for him to walk back through it and tell us that he changed his mind. But we all know it's not going to happen.

"Come on." Jenna coaxes the kids gently. "Let's go see what we can find for lunch."

"I'm not hungry." Mumbles River, even as he traipses into the dining room after her. "Can we have ice cream?"

I carry Asta over to the stairs, lowering us onto one of the bottom steps so that I can keep her close, and so that I won't have to worry about my arms getting tired. She resists my attempts to comfort her at first, she pushes against my chest and tries to turn around and struggle her way out of my hold. But my arms remain wrapped around her no matter what she does, until she finally gives in and goes limp against me. I sit there with her until she stops crying, hushing her softly and telling her that he'll be back. I'm not sure if she actually believes me, but at least she eventually calms down.

She spends the rest of the day either in my arms or following me around the house like she's afraid I'll leave her if she doesn't keep an eye on me. When I go to the bathroom she waits outside the door, asking me if I'm done yet and telling me she wants to come in! Any other day this kind of attention would be too ridiculous for me to handle, and I would tell her to go and play in her room or something.

But today I simply let her be ridiculous and I don't say a word about it.
Jenna and I do our best to keep the kids entertained and distracted with whatever activities they show even the slightest interest in. She ends up baking and decorating cookies and cupcakes with Penny and Viggo, which seems to cheer them up considerably. River isn't feeling quite as sociable, and he asks to be allowed to go down to the studio and bang the hell out of our drum kit. Asta wants to cuddle up in the movie room with me and watch 'Frozen' for the millionth time, and Ezra opts to sprawl out on the couch in the family room with Duke and play video games.

By the end of the day, I'm exhausted. It's not like I really did all that much, but it's unreasonably exhausting to pretend to be totally fine when you're not. I had planned to stay awake until Tommy got back from San Diego, but I find myself drifting in and out of sleep on the couch while half-heartedly watching movies. One minute Katherine Heigl is getting knocked up, and the next a forty-year-old Steve Carell is trying to lose his virginity. When I open my eyes in the middle of some crappy Matthew McConaughey chick flick, I turn the TV off altogether and surrender to sleep completely.

I'm not sure what time it is when I wake up again. Tommy is kneeling on the floor beside the couch, stroking the tip of his finger up and down the bridge of my nose with a feather light touch until I open my eyes. He smiles at me fondly, and I automatically smile back as I slowly sit up and rub the back of my sore neck. Part of me wants to ask him what time it is, just so I have some idea of how long we have together before he really has to leave. But an even bigger part of me doesn't want to know.

I just want to take him by the hand, lead him upstairs to our bedroom, and spend however much or however little time we have left together entirely wrapped up in him.

So that's exactly what I do.

Everything between us is unhurried and intentional, every touch, every move. It's wordless, because there's nothing to be said that we're not already saying to each other with every look we share. All I can think is "twenty-two days". Twenty-two days until I can kiss him. Twenty-two days until I can feel his lips and fingertips on my skin.

Twenty-two days until I can feel whole again.

I know it's nothing in the grand scheme of things. Three weeks and one day. It's not even the longest we've spent apart since we got back together almost three years ago. But it's been so long since we last spent more than a couple of nights away from each other. After everything that has happened between us lately, those seemingly meager twenty-two days feel like an endless stretch laid out before us.

And I'm scared.

I know he'll come home...

But I'm afraid that when he does, he might be different somehow. I don't want to lose what we have, I don't want what we are to change. A month ago I thought that we'd made it, that we had no more battles to fight and no more hills to climb. Suddenly I don't feel quite so safe and secure.

"Promise me you'll come back.” I blurt out into the darkness around us, and he lifts his head from my shoulder to look me in the eyes.

"What the fuck are you talking about? Of course I'm gonna come back. Where else would I-"

"No..." I cut him off, holding his confused stare as I take a deep breath and try again. "Promise me
It takes him a long moment of frowning at me before what I'm saying starts to sink in. I'm expecting him to swear up and down that in three weeks he'll still be who he is right at this moment. In fact, I'm expecting the promise to come so immediately and so easily that I'm not even sure I'll be able to believe it.

But instead he begins to shake his head slowly, remorsefully.

"You know I can't." Do not freak out, Taylor. Do not freak out. "I mean, I can promise if you want me to, but it's not gonna mean anything. I seriously doubt a few weeks on the road is gonna change who I am, but... who the hell knows what's gonna happen?"

"Do you want it to change you?"

"I..." He sighs heavily as he gives an unsure shrug. "I don't wanna be a totally different person or anything, but I don't wanna feel the way I have been."

"I know." I acknowledge sympathetically, my fingers travelling slowly down his arm with my eyes following every step of the way. Over his John Wayne tattoo, the ridge of his elbow, along the stem of the rose that paints the length of his forearm, until my fingers lace with his. "I don't want you to feel that way anymore, either."

His forehead rests against mine as he squeezes my hand appreciatively. "I know."

I stupidly glance at the clock when he lays his head back down on my chest, and I see that it's nearly five am. He told me he'd have to leave by six, and knowing that we now have minutes instead of hours together is enough to leave my heart pounding so hard that it almost makes me nauseous. I think he can feel it, because he untangles his fingers from mine and begins to trail them slowly across my chest, over and over, until the panic gradually subsides and I feel as though I can breathe evenly again. It's so soothing that I find myself drifting further and further from consciousness, no matter how many times I try to pull my mind back to this moment and focus on him.

He must be able to feel that, too.

"If you fall asleep... I won't wake you up when I go." He whispers.

"But-"

"I don't wanna do the whole goodbye thing, I fucking hate it. And it's pointless, 'cause it's not goodbye. I'm gonna see you in three weeks."

"I don't want to wake up and have you just be gone." I object despondently. "I hate waking up without you."

"Would you rather watch me leave?" No. "I did a lot of research that first year we were together, and believe me, it's better if you fall asleep now and wake up after I'm gone. It's like surgery, you know? You're unconscious while your guts are being ripped out. It's less painful."

"Not by much."

"Not much is still a hell of a lot better than not at all." He smiles sadly as he raises his head to look at me again. "Something else I learned that year."

I know he's right. It'll be marginally easier on both of us if I'm unaware of his departure while it's
actually happening. I remember when I used to have to leave him, and it was always a hell of a lot
harder to know he was watching me walk away.

"I'm gonna miss you." I tell him, my voice wavering as I fight to keep my ever intensifying emotions
under control. "So much."

His hand reaches up to cup my face and his thumb lightly strokes my cheek before he leans in to kiss
me. It's slow and soft, an unmistakable goodbye without him having to say that one, excruciating
word.

"I'll see you soon, baby."
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

I'm going to try to post one more chapter before Christmas, I think. I'm going out of town from December 23rd - January 4th, so I won't have access to my computer to post between those times. Besides, I'm sure most people will be way too busy with their own holiday plans to be on AO3 much. ;)

The last two weeks have been a harsh reminder of just how unsuited I am for single parenthood. They say it takes a village to raise a child. Well, I have five children, so even with a village it's still an exhausting, uphill struggle.

Despite the fact that I had extra help from Jenna while we were still in L.A., the kids were almost late to school several days of their last week before summer vacation. I forgot which day Penny's dance class was on, I nearly forgot to show up for the talent show I'd agreed to hand out awards at, and we had takeout for dinner more times than I'd like to admit. I'm still trying to repress the memory of the near catastrophe we had on the morning of our flight, when I realized that I'd forgotten to take Duke (along with his food, toys and bed) over to Dia's house.

Thankfully, Jenna very kindly volunteered to do it for me so that we wouldn't be late getting to the airport. If she hadn't been there, I could have been seriously screwed!

I thought things would be better once we got to Tulsa; I'd have dozens of people ready and willing to help out with the kids, and I'd be spending all day almost every day in the studio with my brothers. And in some ways, it has been easier. My mom had already put together a "schedule" for who was going to be babysitting and when, so all I had to do each day was get the kids up, dressed, fed, and delivered to whichever family member had volunteered to have them. But honestly... it's all been a little too much like it used to be before we moved to L.A.

Before Tommy came back into my life.
I think the kids are feeling it, too. They were excited for a break from school, and they've been having a lot of fun with their extended family. But even though we don't all come home to the same house we lived in with their mom, those evening hours when it's just the six of us are a lot quieter than I'm used to. The only time they perk up is when we Skype with Tommy before they go to bed and he hits the stage.

And then once they're all asleep, I'm alone in the house I grew up in. It's the place I called home before anyone outside of Tulsa knew who I was, and I've always felt safe there for that very reason. I still do, for the most part. But at night, when it's just me, I'm surrounded by memories of my past. And though the majority of the memories I made in that house are fond, the past is not a place I like to visit too frequently. For the first time in my life, I prefer my present. Or I did before Tommy left on tour. Now I devote a lot of mental energy to thinking about the future.

Nine days from now, to be specific.

It's hard to tell how Tommy's feeling through a computer screen or over the phone. He says everything is "good" and "fine", but he doesn't really go into much detail about how his time on the road is going. Sometimes, when he doesn't seem to be having the time of his life, I'm selfishly relieved. It's not that I don't want him to enjoy himself, but I can't help thinking that maybe, if he's not happy out there, he won't want to go back on tour again anytime soon. And whenever I have those thoughts, I want to kick myself in the nuts. Because at the end of the day, more than I want him to be home with us, I want him to be happy. I want us all to be happy, but as usual, it's pretty much impossible to please everyone.

I might understand why he needs to do this, but the kids don't. Not entirely, anyway. We told them that it's his job, but in their minds everything had been just fine these past couple of years without him touring. And if we tell them that not touring is making him unhappy, all they'll hear is that being at home with them makes him unhappy.

It's not like when I used to tour or work all the time and they stayed home with Natalie; they were born into that lifestyle and it was pretty consistent for most of their lives. But everything changed when Natalie died and we moved to L.A.. They got used to things being different, to both of us being there day in and day out.

And then out of nowhere one of us up and left.

I don't think it's unfair or unreasonable for them to be afraid that life as they know it is about to change all over again. I'm afraid, too. But if that's what's in the cards for us, then we'll just have to make it work the way we always do.

If there's one silver lining to come out of all of this, it's that Ezra seems to want to spend more time with me now than he usually does when we're at home. The first couple of days we were in Tulsa he went with his younger siblings to Pam's or my parent's for the day while I went to the studio. But on the third day he asked if he could come with me instead. I told him that I would be working all day and he would be bored. But he said he'd be fine, so I let him tag along. And he's tagged along every day since. He mostly hangs out in the control room with Ryan, our engineer. He reads, and draws, and plays video games with Zac during our down time. And whenever I'm not needed for recording, I go back there and spend time with him. He's been listening to the songs coming together and giving us his opinion, though it took a little prodding from us to get him to admit that he even had an opinion at first.

Every day it's as though I can see him gaining confidence in himself. And in me. I thought things were good between us back in L.A., before the baby announcement, but now they're even better than that. It's possible that our relationship is better now than it has been since before Natalie died.
"I wanna do another take." Zac sighs as Ryan cuts the playback on the drum track he just recorded.

I can't help but roll my eyes at him, and I'm pretty sure that Ike and Ryan are doing the same thing. "You're being way too critical. There was nothing wrong with that last take, it was great."

"It was fine." He argues. "It could be better."

"Dude, come on, there's like a million other things we could be working on right now instead of indulging your anal-retentive tendencies." Protests Ike with a weary groan. "That last one was great, and if there was anything about it you don't like, we have more than enough previous takes we can pull from. So let's just move on for now, and if we have time later maybe you can do another take."

"You just wanna move on because you know that if we do we're gonna get totally distracted, and then we'll never come back to this!"

"Zac, as much as it pains me to say it, Ike is right."

"Thank you." Ike nods triumphantly. "And also, screw you."

"You're welcome." I smirk, glancing over at Ezra and noticing the way he's smiling to himself as he doodles in his sketchbook. "Ez, what do you think about the drums?"

He shrugs unconcernedly, never looking up from the paper in front of him. "They sounded good to me."

"See?"

"See what? That you're all wrong? Yeah, it's pretty obvious."

"No, that even an impartial third party thinks it sounds good. And he heard all the other takes, too, which is more than can be said for anyone who's gonna hear the finished version of this song." I contend in my most even and reasonable tone. But it's obvious that no amount of reason is going to sway him on this. "Tell me exactly what it is about that take that you think you could improve on in the next one."

He scowls at me, knowing full well that he can't tell me exactly what it is because he doesn't even know. He's being overly critical of his own performance, and it's completely ridiculous because there's nothing to be critical of! I'm the crazy perfectionist of the group, anyone who has ever spent five minutes in a studio with us can attest to that. So if I can't hear anything wrong with it then chances are there is nothing wrong with it.

"Whatever." He mutters petulantly. "Let's just move on."

"Hallelujah!" Exclaims Ike, throwing his hands up in exaggerated praise as he turns his desk chair back to the mixing console. "Okay, Tay, you're up."

After taking a long swig of my almost cold coffee I start to make my way out of the room, only to have Zac grab me by my elbow and pull me back. He's still got that grumpy little glare going, and it takes everything I have not to crack a smile and piss him off even more.

"Just know that when you come in here whining about how you wanna do one more take on the B3 because 'it didn't feel right' to you, I'm gonna duct tape you to a chair, gag you with your own beanie, and beat you with a tambourine."

"Noted." I nod solemnly.
As usual, we get so wrapped up in making music (and arguing about making music) that we lose all track of time. It's not until Ezra asks if we can order pizza that any of us realize how late it is. I was supposed to be at my parent's house to have dinner with them and the kids almost half an hour ago, and it's going to take us almost twenty minutes to drive there from here.

Sometimes in my quest to be a good musician, I wind up being a terrible father and son.

I give my mom a call to apologize profusely and let her know that we're on our way, and she tells me she saved us some food and to drive safely. She doesn't even sound annoyed, in fact she sounds kind of amused. I guess this is familiar territory for her; I used to be late for family meals constantly because of work. But even if my one-track mind is funny to her, to me it's unsettling. I've done my utmost to avoid incidents like this one over the last few years. I want to be there for my family, they have to come first.

When we get to my parent's house it turns out that everyone is relaxing and enjoying themselves, which helps alleviate a little of my guilt. Zoe is painting Penny and Asta's toenails, and the boys are engrossed in a game of Zingo. So engrossed that they barely even acknowledge our presence with more than a distracted "hi" when we enter the room.

"There you two are." Mom greets us cheerfully. "I was starting to think you'd gotten into one of those heated arguments with your brothers that takes hours to resolve."

"Almost." I chuckle tiredly at the thought of it as Ezra and I follow her into the kitchen. "Sorry again for not calling sooner to let you know we'd be late."

"You act like this hasn't been the norm since you were ten." She teases. "Even before you had your own studio, trying to coax you three out of the garage and away from your music long enough to eat a meal was like an endurance trail."

"Well, I'm sorry for that, too."

"You're impossible."

I sigh glumly, as though I'm not fully aware that she was kidding. "Again, sorry."

"Be quiet and eat your dinner." Demands mom sternly, placing a plate of meatloaf and vegetables in front of me and turning her attention to Ezra. "How was your day, sweetheart? Did they feed you at all?"

"Of course I fed him!" I exclaim before Ezra has a chance to answer. "And I made sure his water bowl never went empty."

"I wasn't asking you."

"It was good." He laughs softly as he picks up his knife and fork to cut into his food. "I finished one of the books on my summer reading list, and uncle Zac showed me the stop motion animation he's working on."

"And he helped resolve several disagreements." I add, winking at him conspiratorially when mom rolls her eyes at me. "He's very wise."

"He's twelve! He shouldn't be spending his summer vacation mediating petty fights between grown men! Maybe it's not such a good idea for him to be spending so much time with you while you're working. I know what the three of you can be like with each other sometimes, and he definitely doesn't need to be around that. Nobody does."
"It's not that bad." Protests Ezra. "They only use curse words when they get really angry."

"Taylor!"

He's so my son. "It wasn't me, it was Ike!"

"I don't know where I went wrong." She mumbles to herself as she turns and leaves us struggling to contain our laughter until she's out of the room.

Since we're running late tonight, there isn't enough time for me to drive the kids home for our Skype date with Tommy before he has to go on stage. So instead I commandeered my parent's laptop, and the six of us shut ourselves away in the den. The first time we Skyped with him after he left on tour, it was total chaos. The kids couldn't agree on who got to speak first, so they spent half the time arguing with each other and complaining that they couldn't see the screen properly. It took us a few tries, but eventually we got a system down that seemed to work for everyone. They each get a chance to speak to him, starting with Ezra because he's the oldest. Once whoever's talking to him is done, they step aside and let the next person have a turn. Sometimes they still try to interrupt each other, but it's definitely a lot easier for him to understand what's being said than it was when they were all talking at once.

Even though I try not to dwell on it or let it show, those first few seconds after his face appears on screen are always painful. It's just a reminder of how far away he is.

"Hey!" He smiles, taking a moment to figure out where exactly he should be looking. Just like he always does. "How's it going?"

"Same old, same old." I shrug as I try my best to smile for him (and keep the kids at bay). "I got stuck at the studio a little later than usual, so we're still at my parent's house."

"How'd recording go today?"

"Good. We're still a little behind schedule, but."

"I wanna talk to him!" Viggo cuts me off impatiently. "Can't you just talk to him later?"

"It's not your turn." I remind him. "Ezra goes first."

"But if you spend forever talking before Ezra goes, then I have to wait longer!"

"Yeah, Taylor." Agrees Tommy playfully. "You talk too much."

"Fine, maybe I just won't talk to you anymore."

"Fine." He retorts with such feigned derision that I can't keep myself from smiling as I move aside and let Ezra take my seat in front of the screen. "Hey, Ez."

"Hey." Ezra replies somewhat awkwardly. He's the only one who ever seems to feel even slightly uncomfortable during these nightly chats, which is crazy because the two of them have no problem talking when they're in the same room together. "Where are you?"

"Toronto."

"Cool."

"Yeah, I guess." Chuckles Tommy, glancing over his shoulder at the room he's in. "We just got here this morning. I haven't really seen much of the city, but at least they actually let me cross the border."
"Anyone can get into Canada! They're not picky!" I heckle him from off screen, and I know he's flipping me off, despite the fact that he's holding his other hand in front of his middle finger to hide it.

"So what did you do today?" He asks Ezra, pretending to ignore me entirely. "Did you hang out at the studio again?"

"Yeah. I like it there."

"How's the new music sounding?"

"I think it's good, but they keep arguing about stuff. I don't even hear anything wrong with it, but they're always saying something is too slow, or too fast, or too... whatever."

"And you enjoy that?" Tommy questions skeptically.

"It's kinda funny." Smirks Ezra, bringing a similar expression to Tommy's face. "They fight over how stuff sounds the same way River and Penny fight over what movie to watch. Only they say the F word a lot."

"Okay, Penny's turn!" I announce abruptly (and only semi-seriously).

"I'll talk to you tomorrow, okay?"

"Have a good show."

"Thanks, dude." Tommy smiles fondly, waiting until Ezra has gotten out of his seat and Penny has taken his place. "Hey!"

"Hi!" She waves, causing her own nails to catch her eye. "Look! Me and Asta had a mani-pedi day with Auntie Zoe. She used some of her new nail polish on us."

"Oh yeah? What color did you get?"

"It's blue with sparkles." She tells him while she moves her hand back and forth in front of the camera until it's as in focus as it's going get. "But you can't really see the sparkles on the computer."

"Well if you still have the same color on when I get there, I can see it then."

"Yeah..." Her shoulders visibly slump in disappointment as the fact that he's so far away really sinks in for her. I feel like it hits her just as hard every night. "I probably won't still have it on, though. It doesn't last that long."

"It's only like nine more days now." He reassures her remorsefully. "We're over halfway."

"I know."

His well meaning attempts to cheer her up aren't really very successful, they hardly ever are, and he's forced to say goodnight to her without improving her mood first. I wish there was something I could do to make it easier on them both, on all of us, but the only thing I can do is continuously reassure everyone that we'll all be together again soon.

At least his conversations with River and Viggo are more upbeat, for the most part. They always give him unnecessarily detailed accounts of their day, and he always smiles and nods and acts like it's all vitally important. Because to them it is. They do the same thing at home all the time, but at home there's no limit on our time with them at the end of the day. No matter how positive their Skype sessions with Tommy are, their smiles immediately start to fade when I ruefully remind them that he
needs to say goodbye.

His interactions with Asta are pretty amusing to watch. It's probably a good thing that she goes last, that way at least he gets to end these chats on a high note. She has *a lot* of trouble keeping her hands off of the screen while she's talking to him, it's like she's trying to reach through it and touch him. And she actually believes it's working because he plays along. He puts on a show convincing enough to make her think that he can feel her palm when she presses it to the screen, which in turn convinces her that she can feel him when he does the same. Don't even get me started on her futile attempts to kiss him goodnight.

It's kind of completely adorable, and I may or may not have several videos of it on my iPhone.

I don't really get to talk to him before the kids go to bed; I don't want to take away from their time with him or leave him feeling rushed to get ready to perform. But he calls me once the show is over and he's all packed up. Typically I'll be in bed by that point, and there have been a couple of instances when his calls have woken me up. I don't mind, though, it's my favorite part of the day (or night). Sometimes we'll talk almost non-stop for the entire call, about my day in the studio and his day on the road. And other times we'll hardly talk at all, even though those calls still last just as long as the ones that are full of conversation. I'm not ashamed to admit that I've fallen asleep while lying in silence with him on the other end of the line. My phone battery is dead when I wake up, and it's *completely* worth it.

After getting the kids back to my family's old house and going through our usual bedtime routine, I settle in for a night of Netflix. At home, Tommy and I end most nights together in front of the TV, whether we're watching what's on or using it as background noise while we're making out on the couch. It's the perfect way to unwind from the day. Sadly, lying in bed alone and watching *Breaking Bad* on my laptop isn't nearly as effective at helping me decompress.

I'm so disgustingly co-dependent.

Just as I feel myself starting to drift off in the middle of an episode, my cell starts to ring and I snatch it off of the nightstand like someone else might beat me to it if I'm not fast enough. But then I let it ring a couple more times so that he won't have yet *more* proof of how desperate and needy I am.

"Hey, rock star."

I hear him giggle quietly, and the sound of it leaves me grinning. "Hey, loser. Were you sleeping?"

"Nah, I was just watching TV." I tell him, closing my laptop for the night because I know I won't be needing it again. "How was the show?"

"Great! Probably the best yet, actually. It's like each show is better than the last, 'cause the more we get to know each other and play together, the tighter we sound. It's kind of a shame we're just hitting our stride when we only have like four shows left."

"Yeah."

"I mean, I'm not saying I wish we had more shows or anything." He clarifies carefully. "Just that we'd had longer to practice and stuff before the tour started."

"I get it. No musician wants to perform any less than their best. No *good* musician, anyway. You always wanna put on the best show you can. But just because you guys are sounding better with each show, that doesn't mean you all weren't giving it one hundred percent before now."

"I guess."
"I know you. Even when you don't absolutely love the music you're playing, you still play it like you do."

"I've got you fooled." He jokes, and I scowl at him even though he's not here to see it. "I don't wanna talk about me anymore. You never got to finish telling me how things are going in the studio."

"Fine, for the most part. It feels like we waste a lot of time and energy bickering about totally minor stuff. But I know that at the end of the day it's not really a waste because it all contributes to making the best album we possibly can."

"Think you're gonna finish by the time we head back to L.A.?"

I really hope so. "Yeah, we'll be fine. We always do this to ourselves, and then we have like this big surge of productivity right at the end and it all comes together. Doesn't make falling behind feel any less stressful up until that point, though."

"'Cause you're a fucking stress magnet." He taunts with a soft chuckle. "You stress out about anything you can think of to stress out about. And if you can't think of anything to stress about, you create something to stress about. I think you thrive on it."

It's so true. That's the most accurate description of me I've ever heard.

"That's completely untrue!"

"Go on, stress out about the fact that I called you a stress magnet. You know you want to."

"Fuck you."

He groans longingly, causing goosebumps to rise all over my body. "I wish."

I wish, too.

I wish I'd never said it, because now it's all I can think about! We made this stupid bet the first night we spoke on the phone after he left L.A.. Usually when we're apart for more than one night (which is incredibly rare), we end up having phone sex. What can I say? We're like crack addicts.

But during that first phone conversation, just as we were flirting our way to the fun stuff, he started teasing me. And not in the seductive way I was expecting. He said that he bet he could go longer without trying to initiate sex than I could. Something about him having more willpower than I do. Which, again, is completely true. But I wasn't about to just lie there and take his smug taunting!

So like the idiot I am, I took the bet instead.

Every night since then has been a constant battle between my dick and my dignity. Sometimes I tell myself I'm just going to give in and let him win, that it'll be worth it. But I really don't like to lose bets. So we haven't had sex of any kind in almost two weeks now, which is by far the longest dry spell we've had in well over two years!

And somewhere along the line... I decided that it would actually be better to wait. I know that makes me sound like some chaste virgin saving myself for my wedding night, and we all know what a joke that is. I just can't help thinking about how incredible that first time we're together after three weeks apart will be. It would've been amazing even if we'd had phone sex every night; I can only imagine what it's going to be like if we haven't gotten each other off at all the entire time we've been apart.
So I don't care how bad the cravings get or how painful the withdrawal symptoms are.

This crack addict is *determined* to wait it out!
Today has been one of those days.

You know how some days seem to fly by too quickly when you have a laundry list of things to get done? This was not one of those days. It was the kind of day that drags on and on. Which is stupid, because it's been just like every other day for the past two weeks. I got up, got the kids dressed and fed, delivered them safely to my parent's house, and went to work. But today, rather than losing all track of time because it's going by so fast, I'm counting down the minutes until I can call it a day and get the hell out of here.

Because as soon as I leave here, I get to go to the airport and pick Tommy up.

His flight from L.A. to Denver is about to land at any minute. And then his connection to Tulsa will take off in just under an hour. He'll be here in less than three hours. Finally. It's like my heart beat quickens more and more the closer he gets!

I wasn't entirely sure that I'd have the self-control to survive the twenty-five minute drive from Tulsa International to my family's old house in Jenks without pulling over on the side of the road and pouncing on him. The fact that he texted me right before he left L.A. and jokingly told me that he was bringing some lube with him in his carry on "just in case" didn't really help. So immediately after I got his message, I went online and booked us an airport hotel room. It's nothing fancy, but it doesn't need to be. It has a king size bed and room service, and that's all we need.

Actually, those things aren't even necessities, they're a bonus!

"Tay?"

"Huh?"

Zac quirks an eyebrow at me in amusement. "Whatcha thinkin' about?"

"Nothing."
"You were having impure thoughts, weren't you?" He laughs quietly as my cheeks begin to burn. "Yup. You're turning red; the color of the devil. Heathen!"

"I was not having impure thoughts!"

"Uh-huh."

"Can we please stop debating whether or not Taylor's thinking about butt sex and do some actual work before I pour acid in my ears?" Sighs Ike, shaking his head as he turns his attention from the computer screen in front of him to my guilty face. "You ready to finish those group vocals now, or do you need some ‘alone time’ first?"

Quite honestly, I would prefer to sit here and continue thinking about what I'm going to be doing later this evening. But that's probably not going to pass the time as quickly as working will, so I force myself off of the leather couch and out into the studio with my brothers.

It's crazy to think that we're (supposedly) so close to being done with the majority of recording for our next album. It's been a year in the making and now the finish line is in sight. In just over a week I'll be on my way home, and we need to have as much as possible done by then. Ike and Zac will be coming out to L.A. in a few weeks so that we can work on mixing and any minor re-recording we need to do, but minor stuff is all we want to be tackling at that point. Right now, that seems like an impossible feat. I'm sure they're moderately frustrated with me for taking off early tonight, and for taking the entire day off tomorrow; it's time we could be putting to good use in the studio. And I'm not saying that I don't feel slightly guilty for that...

But no way in hell am I going to spend any less than twenty-four hours with Tommy after almost as many days away from him!

I try my best to be as present as possible for the remainder of our time in the studio, and I personally think I deserve some kind of award for how productive I end up being. Thankfully, productivity really does make the time pass faster, and I'm not even aware that I'm free to leave until my cell phone alarm goes off. Then I can't get out of the building fast enough. In fact, I'm moving so fast that I'm on track to get to the airport with way too much time to spare, which is going to drive me (and everyone forced to stand in the arrivals terminal with me) crazy.

Just as I take the exit for Tulsa International, I realize that I could put my spare time to good use by checking into the hotel. That way we won't have to bother with it after I pick him up, we can just go straight up to our room.

I love it when it feels like the universe is on my side and actually wants me to have sex!

Once I finally make it to the airport, I do my best to find a parking spot as close to the main terminal as I can get. And as I close the car door behind me, I get a text alert to let me know that Tommy's flight has landed. I know it's pointless to run all the way to arrivals, because there's no way he's going to get there before I do, but I'm that excited to see him. I want to be there the second he rounds that corner and comes into view, I don't want to miss even the tiniest glimpse of him.

Sometimes it still surprises me just how addicted to him I am, even after all this time. I'm just as eager to be with him now as I've ever been. It's like I can't accept that having him in my life every day isn't remarkable anymore, that it's just... my life.

I think it'll always be remarkable to me.

As soon as he comes into view I have to restrain myself from shoving several people aside and
charging the wrong way through that revolving "exit only" door with the bored TSA agent sitting beside it. That guy is just praying for someone to do something they shouldn't so that he can tackle them to the ground, and he's not the one I want to be tackled by. Instead of doing something impatient and stupid, I will Tommy to walk faster, and I swear he actually does pick up his pace. I get as close to the door that's separating us as I think I can without having security order me to step back, but when Tommy steps through it I stop worrying about remaining an appropriate distance away.

He's right there!

Public displays of same-sex affection are still pretty rare in Oklahoma, even in more progressive (and I use that term very loosely) cities like Tulsa. A few years ago I was a lot more aware of how we behaved in public places here than I ever am when we're in L.A., but I try my hardest not to care anymore. People are going to disapprove with silent scowls and disgusted headshakes, sometimes they might even make rude comments or call us names. It's a waste of time trying to make them see that we're not what they think we are, and that's time I could be putting to much better use.

"Could you have been in less of a hurry?" I tease Tommy between breathless kisses. "It was like you were moving in slow motion."

He bites my lower lip in retaliation, just sharply enough to make me gasp. "My bag is heavy."

"Poor baby."

"And my pants don't stay up when I run."

"So?" I smirk.

"So I really don't think the old lady behind me wanted to see my ass."

"Maybe she doesn't, but I do." Pecking him on the lips one last time, I reluctantly let him go and take his insanely heavy backpack from him. "What the hell did you put in here? A dead body?"

"A week's worth of clothes and a bunch of other shit." He shrugs, effortlessly slipping his arm around my waist and leaning against me as we make our way through the airport. "I didn't wanna waste time waiting around for them to unload my bag, so I stuffed everything into that one."

"So you're saying you don't have a checked bag?" I ask hopefully, practically grinning when he shakes his head. "I love you."

Because he's so smart and well prepared, we get to bypass the baggage carousels completely, which spares us several minutes of standing around with a bunch of strangers and trying not to grope each other (or wasting all of our pent up sexual tension on a five minute bathroom stall encounter). When we get to the car, I have to exercise an incredible amount of self-control and start the engine instead of grabbing him. He, on the other hand, has nothing else to focus his attention on. We haven't even made it out of the parking lot before I feel his hand on my thigh. It's not unusual for him to put his hand on my leg while I'm driving, but most of the time it's a hell of a lot closer to my knee than my crotch. Or at least somewhere in between! I have to keep reminding myself that we're just a few minute's drive from the hotel...

All I have to do is concentrate on not crashing (or coming) before we get there!

"How far to the house?" He asks, his fingers inching further along the inside of my thigh. "Like... twenty minutes?" He gives a brief squeeze and I make some pathetic little sound as my hands grip the steering wheel more tightly. "Twenty-five?"
"We're not going to the house."

He laughs softly, obviously not taking me seriously. "So where are we going? A moonlit corn field? Or maybe a nice romantic barn-"

"A garden."

"Huh?"

"Inn."

"What?" He frowns in total confusion before I point straight ahead at the quickly approaching Hilton Garden Inn Hotel. "Wait... you got us a hotel room?"

"It was either that or the back seat of this car somewhere between here and Jenks. I figured a bed would be comfier."

"I love the way you think!" He beams as I pull the car into one of the few vacant parking spots left. "When you actually bother to think."

"Is this your idea of foreplay?"

"Why, is it turning you on?"

Hell yes, it's turning me on!

I know it probably seems twisted for me to be getting excited over him insulting me, but it has less to do with what he's saying and more to do with the way he's saying it. He could babble absolute nonsense, and as long as he does it in that tone and with that gleam in his eyes, I'm going to get off on it.

"You know what would turn me on even more?" I reply as nonchalantly as I can, and he raises an eyebrow in question. "You getting out of this car and into that hotel. Unless you'd actually prefer I drag you by your hair into the backseat, 'cause we're about five seconds away from that becoming a real possibility."

"You're making it sound pretty fucking tempting..."

No, Taylor.

You did not pay for a hotel room so you could have sex in the hotel parking lot!

"Get out of the car."

"Make me."

After holding his challenging and extremely flirtatious stare for a few more seconds, I force myself out of the car. I'm aware that his eyes are following me every step of the way as I walk around to the passenger side and open his door, and it's impossible to ignore the smug little smile on his face when I lean across him to unbuckle his seatbelt. Despite my best efforts to resist, my lips are on his before the belt has even finished retracting, and he moans eagerly as I grab the front of his shirt, tug him out of the car with me, and push the door shut behind him. I know I should pull away, or at least attempt to navigate us in the direction of the hotel entrance, but I can't bring myself to let him go, and I don't want to be any further away from him than I am right now.

He pulls me up against him as his back hits the side of the car, and the soft sounds he's making seem
so much louder than they really are when they dissipate into the quite parking lot around us. His short fingernails dig into my shoulder blades through my t-shirt, and his breath against my ear as I hungrily kiss his neck sends a shiver down my spine.

"I seriously don't think I'm gonna make it past the elevator if we go in there..." He warns me with a defenseless little whimper, leaving me feeling just as weak as he sounds. "You shouldn't have kissed me."

"You shouldn't have let me." I practically growl as his hands drop to my hips and he pulls me closer, even though there was barely any space left between us before.

His body bucks against mine, and I brace myself against the car for a moment as I try to catch my breath and remember how to think rationally. But then he does it again, and any chance of me having a rational thought is basically lost. I'm not sure how I'm supposed to think at all when he starts unzipping my pants, but I somehow manage to summon the presence of mind to reach out and open the back door of the car. As soon as he realizes what I've done, he wastes no time taking me by the hand and pulling me quickly around the door and into the backseat. I want to laugh at how crazy this is, and maybe later I will, but right now I'm too busy pushing his backpack off of the seat and onto the floor to make room for him to lie down.

I can't remember the last time we had sex in a car. I do remember that it's always cramped and clumsy, but I don't remember ever caring. Not for a second. No matter how awkward it is to get undressed, or how many times I bump my head on the roof when I sit up, or how nervous I get about someone seeing us, I don't want to stop. And the thought of relocating to somewhere more spacious and private never crosses my mind.

My mind is too preoccupied with him, with how he feels, and how he sounds, and how he moves.

By the time we've both shed our clothes, I'm so turned on that I'm honestly surprised I don't come the second his tongue touches my erection. I bite my lip hard, hoping that if it hurts enough it might distract me from how incredible his hot mouth feels wrapped around me, his lips gliding effortlessly along the length of me while all I can do is watch him in awe. Maybe I shouldn't watch him. Maybe if I close my eyes...

No.

Not being able to see what he's doing just makes the sensation ten times as intense. Besides, if I close my eyes I'll still be able to see it in vivid detail in my mind. And then I'll start thinking about what I want to do to him, and if I do that, this will be over before it's even really begun!

"Fuck! Tommy... I can't..." I gasp anxiously. "Y-you have to stop."

He knows better than to tease me any more than he already has, and the satisfied smile on his face as he allows me to coax him into a heated kiss is enough to make me moan before our mouths even meet.

I fucking love the way he kisses.

I knew even before our very first kiss that it was going to be incredible, I just knew. It's like he knows what I want before I do, I swear he can change my whole mood with the faintest brush of his lips over mine. It's never too much, and if it's ever not enough then that's entirely intentional on his part and designed to drive me crazy. One stroke of his tongue against mine can make me utterly weak, and one soft gasp against my lips, like the one he just breathed, can make me feel completely in control.
Holding him against me, I try my best to shift him onto his back without us having to end our embrace for even a second. It doesn't go quite as smoothly as I'd hoped, but the inevitable fumbling and uncoordinated repositioning leaves us both laughing at how wonderfully absurd this whole situation is. His back arches off of the seat as I trail my mouth slowly down his chest, feeling it rising and falling rapidly in anticipation the lower I go. My lips ghost over him, touching him with barely more than a breath, leaving him begging and pleading (interspersed with more than a little profanity). I kiss the inside of his left thigh, then the inside of his right, my hands caressing the soft skin just above his hip bones as he squirms hopelessly beneath my touch. He grabs at my hair in a desperate attempt to guide me back to where he'd prefer me to be, but I resist. Instead of putting my mouth on him the way he's begging me to, I curl my fingers around him, making him whimper in frustration even as his hips instinctively thrust towards my touch.

My mouth resumes its lazy exploration of his inner thighs, gradually making its way closer and closer to his erection. I feel his hand tighten in my hair as my lips come within an inch of him, hesitating for just a moment before venturing lower. He moans suddenly, and so loudly that if anyone is out in that parking lot right now, there's no way they didn't hear him.

"Shh." I chuckle quietly as I raise my head to look up at him.

"You fucking shh!" He pants impatiently, shoving my head back down between his legs again.

As I return my focus back to the teasing my tongue was previously occupied with, I can hear him groping around for his backpack and attempting to undo the zipper. I'm tempted to stop and see what he's doing, but I'm pretty sure I already know. I hear the sound of a zip-loc bag being pried open and its contents being carelessly scattered all over the floor. Except for the one thing he was looking for. I kinda wanna tease him about the fact that he actually put lube in his carry-on, for all the TSA screening agents to see. But that can wait until later. I knowingly reach out for the lube without pause, and he gladly shoves the small bottle into my palm. It takes only seconds for me to coat my erection and toss the bottle aside before turning my attention back to him.

I watch him closely, my gaze never leaving his face as I slowly begin to push into him. His teeth sink into his lower lip as he inhales sharply, but his hands grasp at my waist and insistently pull me nearer. The feeling of being inside of him is sheer relief. Not just for me, for him as well. I can see it in the way his brow unfurrows, his teeth release his now swollen lip, and the tension evaporates from his entire body. We've waited weeks for this moment, not what came before or what comes next, but this precise moment of simply being back where we belong.

As we kiss, our bodies instinctively begin to move. Slowly at first, but soon enough we find ourselves back in that frantic, needy, breathless place we started from. His legs curl against my sides, his heels digging into my lower back and intensifying the force of every thrust. I don't need him to tell me he needs more, I can feel it. I quickly hook my arms under his legs, changing the angle just enough to make all the difference, and his reaction is immediate. Every sound of pleasure he exhales provokes every move I make, even as I hopelessly attempt to quiet him with kisses.

After we're both spent, and I can hardly keep myself from collapsing on top of him completely, I can't seem to stop kissing him. I can barely catch my breath, but right now breathing is secondary to showering his shoulders and neck with affection.

"Now I'm not gonna be able to make it up to the hotel room for a totally different reason."

"Which is?" I ask before returning my lips to his collarbone.

"I can't feel my fucking legs." He laughs exhaustedly.
"And getting cleaned up before we go inside isn't going to be easy, either."

"We didn't really think this through, huh?"

I smirk as I look up at him. "I don't think either of us was doing a whole lot of thinking."

He looks around us at the dark interior of the car, searching for a solution to our problem. But the longer he takes in our surroundings, the more confused he starts to look. "Is this a rental car? It's kinda old."

"No, it's my dad's car..." I reply, freezing as the realization of what I've just said dawns on me. He tries to contain his amusement, but once I start cracking up he stops holding back, too. "I guess I finally fulfilled the 'doing it in the backseat of your parents car' cliché."

"Yeah, like fifteen years late. Apparently you missed a few spot while you were busy trying to live your entire fucking life before you turned twenty." He mocks playfully. "Speaking of missing a few spots... we should probably get this thing detailed before you give your dad his keys back."

Oh, God. "Definitely."

"Why the hell are you even driving his car anyway?"

"It's just easier." I explain as we try our best to make enough room to lie down together. It doesn't really work, I'm practically teetering on the edge of the seat. But he doesn't need to know that. "I've been trading cars with whoever has the kids for the day, since no one has a car big enough to drive them all anywhere. Plus, getting the car seats in and out twice a day would be a pain in the ass."

"Makes sense." The corners of his mouth curl into a devilish grin, and I already know that whatever it is he's thinking is totally inappropriate. "Next time, we should do it in Pam's car."

I give him a pathetic shove on the shoulder, partly because I'm still too wiped out to manage anything more forceful, but mostly because I'm not as appalled as I'm pretending to be. "Be nice!"

"That is me being nice! There are way worse things I could do in her car if I wasn't being nice."

"You're terrible."

Except that he's not. No matter how much shit he talks, he'd never actually do any of the awful things he claims he would. Not because he doesn't have the guts, but because he has too much heart. Even if someone treats him like crap, the most he'll ever do in retaliation is tell them to go fuck themselves.

Sometimes he won't even do that.

"How long do you think we can stay out here before someone sees us? Assuming they haven't already."

"Hmm..." I pretend to give it some serious, in depth consideration for a moment before meeting his smiling eyes. "Maybe another five minutes?"

"Okay." He takes a deep breath before settling against me. "Should be long enough to regain sensation in my legs."

"If not, I'll just have to carry you in there."

"You wouldn't make it from here to the fucking lobby."
"Wanna bet?"

He gives an unconcerned shrug. "Sure, why not? I just won our last bet, so-"

"Like hell you did!" I exclaim incredulously. "You were the one who practically begged me to fuck you on the backseat, telling me you couldn't make it up to the hotel room-"

"Yeah, 'cause you were humping me against the side of the car so hard it probably left a dent."

"Only because you were being all feisty and disobedient!"

"That's just my personality!" He protests, somehow managing to keep a straight face. "I can't help who I am."

He's so full of shit; I totally won that bet!

But I'm totally going to let him think that he won instead. Because even though I could happily lie here with him all night and debate which one of us is more responsible for what just transpired on this backseat, I'd much rather spend my time kissing him.

"Fine." I sigh grudgingly. "You win."

A smug smile spreads across his face as soon as I say the words. But despite the fact that I'm pouting on the outside, I don't feel like the loser in this situation at all.
I may have booked us a hotel room so that we could avoid having sex in a parked car, but I was completely okay with that plan going to hell. It was inevitable; I should have known better than to try to fight the inevitable. And since no one saw us (that we know of), there were definitely no regrets on my part.

Even though our reunion hadn't started quite how I'd thought it would, the rest of the night played out pretty much as I'd expected. Once we'd made ourselves presentable enough to venture into the hotel, we headed for our room, dumped our bags on the bed and made a beeline for the shower. If we hadn't just had sex, there's no doubt in my mind that we would have been all over each other before the water had even had chance to warm up. Instead, we took our time simply standing together under the steady spray, surrounded by a thick shroud of steam, completely absorbed in each other. Aside from a little flirtatious commentary on how boring our showers had been without each other, and how we'd had to resort to actually using them for personal hygiene, neither of us really said anything much.

We were content to just be.

After our shower, we collapsed on the bed in our bath towels and I ordered us some well earned dinner from room service while Tommy scanned the TV channels for something to serve as semi-interesting background noise. We talked while we waited for our food, not about anything in particular or anything even slightly important. I was just enjoying the sound of his voice, right there beside me and not coming through a computer speaker or out of a cell phone. It was one of those silly little things that I'd become so used to having in my life on a daily basis, I took for granted how good it sounded. Not having it for three weeks reminded me of just how much I love it, and all of the other seemingly insignificant things he does that I hadn't been able to experience firsthand since he left on tour.

Something else I was enjoying was how relaxed he seemed. It wasn't just late night sleepiness, or post-sex satisfaction (although there was definitely plenty of that, too). It was something more,
something deeper. And I sensed it could possibly be something lasting. Even though I'd been aware of his frustration in the months before this tour came along, I hadn't realized how much I could feel it. It was like he was radiating ever increasing levels of discontent, and it wouldn't have been long before it began contaminating everything he cared about.

I can't feel it anymore.

Maybe that will change as we go back to our 'real life'. Maybe he'll need to get out on the road on a regular basis in order to recharge and feel as though he's where he's meant to be, doing what he loves to do.

And if that's the case, I'm just going to have to deal with it.

Because I want him to feel this way. I want him to be content. I want him to have his dream job, like I do. Even if that means I have to go through more and more three week periods without him. But as much as I want it, I'm still terrified of it. I know it sounds crazy, but as usual, the right thing isn't necessarily the easy thing. It's one of those difficult to swallow pills, but you need to swallow the damn pill if you want to get better.

I tried to ask him about it last night. I wanted to ask him if he felt different, if he thought that the tour had helped, and if he wanted to find a job that would allow him to tour more often. But all I could manage was, "So did you have fun on tour?" And the only response I received was a drowsy, "Mmmhmm" before he passed out with half of his body sprawled across mine. All I could do was lie there and listen to his slow and steady breathing as he slept, my fingers idly stroking the back of the hand he had inadvertently placed over my heart.

I didn't get much sleep.

I drifted in and out for hours, but I had too much on my mind to keep it quiet for long. So I spent most of my time trying to figure out what I wanted to say to Tommy when he wakes up, and what to tell the kids when it comes time to explain to them that Tommy is going to be going out of town a lot more from now on. I know they'll get used to it eventually, no matter how hard it is. They'll be sad at first, and so will I. But if he's happy, we'll all be happy, too.

It's just after seven am when he slowly begins to stir. For a minute or two all he does is squirm intermittently against me, making little sounds of disappointment over the fact that he's waking up. I love watching him wake up, regardless of how 'creepy' he thinks it is. He's freaking adorable, doing everything he can to avoid opening his eyes and surrendering to consciousness. He stuffs his face into his pillow (or my chest, in this case), and then throws his arm over his head to block out any remaining light. Only this time when he goes to cover his head, he winds up smacking me in the face, which immediately wakes us both up.

"Shit! I'm sorry!" He exclaims guiltily, pushing himself up onto one elbow so that he can look down at me and figure out how hurt I am and how sorry he should be. "Are you okay?"

"I think I'm bleeding!" I whine, refusing to take my hand away from my eye no matter how much he tugs on my arm.

"Don't be a fucking baby, let me see."

"I'm blind!"

"You're not completely blind." He informs me unsympathetically. "I only got you in one eye. Want me to do the other?"
I scowl at him as I finally lower my hand from my face. "You're mean."

"You're pathetic."

"Oh yeah?"

He shrugs one shoulder dismissively, like it's not even worth his time and energy to answer me. So I place my hand on that indifferent shoulder of his and push him forcefully onto his back before maneuvering myself on top of him.

"Now how pathetic do you think I am?"

A mischievous grin spreads across his face, just for a second, and then he's back to pretending to be unaffected by anything I say or do. "You're a little less pathetic now, I guess..."

So it's like that, huh?

I reach down and grab his left wrist, pulling it up above his head and pinning it to the mattress, then I go to do the same to the right. But just as I'm about to place my hand down across his wrist, something catches my eye and leaves my hand frozen in mid-air.

"Why'd you stop?" He protests impatiently. "Don't be a fucking tease!"

"What's that?" I ask, my eyes still fixed on the inked mark a couple of inches from his right hand.

He turns his head to look, smiling when he sees what it is that's got my attention. "Oh, right. I got another tattoo last week."

"How come you didn't mention it?"

"I wanted to surprise you. I was gonna show you last night, but I got a little... distracted." He smirks as he intentionally bucks his hips up towards mine. "You like it?"

I tilt my head to the side a little, trying to view it from a slightly different angle. But no amount of head tilting helps me to discern what I'm looking at. "What is it?"

"You seriously don't know?"

Oh, crap. I bet it's something really important, and if I can figure out what it is, it'll totally offend him! Except that apparently he seems to find my obliviousness more amusing than insulting.

"Well... I don't know." I admit somewhat apprehensively. "It's... lines... letters, maybe?"

"What letters?" He urges.

"An H?" He gives a slow nod of approval in answer to my uncertain reply. "And... J?"

"Yup. If you can guess the last one, you get a cookie."

"Um... is it an I?"

"Nope." I frown in confusion while he gazes up at me with a playful smirk on his lips. "I'll give you a hint: an important part of the third letter is also part of the first."

As soon as he points it out, I can see it so clearly that I don't know how I didn't see it before. "T!"
"Yup. And technically the third letter is the second letter and the first letter is the third..."

"Did you mean for that to make absolutely no sense?"

He rolls his eyes at me impatiently, but the smile never leaves his face. "How about you actually stop for a second and give it some fucking thought?"

Okay... think, brain. *Think!*

The third letter is the second letter... so the second letter is T. And the first letter was H, but it's actually the third letter. Which means the real first letter must be J.

JTH.

That's not even a word! There are no vowels in it, I don't even know how to begin to sound it out! And it's not any kind of abbreviation I recognize...

Wait...

"My initials." I realize aloud, my eyes immediately darting from his tattoo to his blushing face. "You got my initials *tattooed* on you?"

"Yeah." He responds simply, like it's no big deal. "We had some downtime in Quebec, and a couple of the other guys decided they wanted to get tattoos. I was just gonna hang out at the hotel, but then I got a reminder thing on my phone saying it was the five year anniversary of the day we met, and... I dunno. I just felt like doing something to commemorate it or whatever."

"You should've told me!" I sigh, shifting off of him and settling on the bed beside him. "I would've done it, too."

He reaches out and takes my right hand in his, turning it over to expose my own tattoo. "You already did, remember?"

"It's not the same."

"It means the same." He insists sincerely, smiling fondly as he watches the pad of his thumb lightly stroking over the small, black bass clef. "You knew. You hadn't even known me for six months, but you were *so* damn sure about your feelings for me that you wanted to have a permanent reminder of them inked into your skin."

"I *was* sure. I knew how I felt about you from day one."

"I know you did. You never tried to pretend not to feel it. Unlike me."

"You had good reason to avoid how you felt." I remind him understandingly. "You didn't want to fall for someone you couldn't be with. Which is totally fair."

"No, it's not. I mean... you didn't wanna fall for someone you couldn't be with, either. But you did. You tried to tell me how you felt about me every fucking chance you got, and I wouldn't let you-"

"You *couldn't* let me." He shakes his head regretfully at the thought of everything we went through back then. Everything we felt, and everything we put each other through as a result of those feelings.

"Doesn't matter anymore. I just... I want you to know that I am sure. I've been sure for five years, even if I gave you plenty of reasons to doubt it. Even if I still do."
"You don't-"

"I run. I try not to, but it's just like... instinct."

"You don't run, you haven't for years-"

"I just did." He admits ashamedly, unable to look me in the eyes for a moment. But when he does look up at me again, there's so much certainty in his stare that it makes my heart beat quicken in anticipation of whatever it is he's about to say. "It was a shitty, selfish thing to do to you and the kids, but... I felt like I had to. I can't really explain it... it was like I was moving in slow motion but everything around me was still moving at normal speed. I just needed it all to stop so I could try to catch up. And I know it didn't actually stop; everything kept going, I just wasn't there to see it. But not being there to see it made it easier to pretend, you know? Like I could catch my breath for a minute without it all getting away from me again. But I need you to know that I wasn't running away from you."

"I get it." I assure him honestly, my fingertips trailing soothingly down his arm in an attempt to offer him some kind of solace. "And for the record, I don't think it was shitty or selfish. It's a lot, our life. Some days it feels simple, but it's not. We just get so used to the crazy. I don't want you to feel like you can't keep up with it all or catch your breath. So if you need to take another break, or several breaks... I understand."

The look on his face right now is one I can only describe as amazement. Somehow he must have had it in his head that the last three weeks were a one-time thing, that he wouldn't be allowed to do it again, because it's obvious he can't believe that I'm lying here telling him that he can take all the time-outs he needs. That he can take anything he needs, I'll give him anything he needs. I just want him to keep breathing. I want us to survive.

He doesn't say anything else. Not "thank you" or "I love you". But the way he kisses me pretty much says it all. The lighthearted play-fighting our morning began with has become something much more meaningful, driven by both certainty and uncertainty. Faith in what we have and fear of somehow losing it.

If I was a more selfish person, I'd try to convince him to stay in bed with me until well into the afternoon. But as much as I want to keep him all to myself for as long as possible, I also don't want to keep him away from the kids any longer. They've all waited long enough. And besides, I'm way too excited to see the looks on their faces (and his) when he walks into the room. They don't know he's in Tulsa yet. Well, Ezra knows because I had to explain why he couldn't come to the studio with me yesterday. But I told his younger brothers and sisters that they were all staying overnight with their grandparents because I had to work really late last night. As far as they know, I'm going to pick them up sometime before lunch and we're going to go to the airport to meet Tommy later this afternoon.

I love it when I get to be sneaky for a good cause and not just to cover my own ass!

After taking another quick shower and running by Starbucks for breakfast, we make a pit stop at a full service car wash on the way to my parent's house. I tell the guy directing cars into various lanes that we want 'The Works', which includes both exterior and interior cleaning. He doesn't seem to think twice about the request until Tommy loses the fight he was putting up against an impending giggle fit, and then the guys looks at us like we're playing a trick on him. I think it's probably better that he assumes that rather than knowing the real reason for our childish amusement.
While we wait for the car to be cleaned, I call my mom and tell her that we're on our way. She's almost as giddy as I am to see the kid's reactions, and she promises to do her best to keep them all occupied and away from the windows so that the surprise won't be ruined.

It's not until we turn onto my parent's street that it becomes obvious to me that Tommy is nervous. No one else would probably be able to tell, but I know the signs. The fidgeting, the nail polish picking, the numerous deep breaths. When it gets to the point where he starts biting his nails, I have to reach across the gear shift and pull his hand away from his mouth.

"Why're you so nervous?"

"I'm not nervous." He laughs unconvincingly, giving me his best 'you're crazy' look.

But I'm not fooled. "I've known you for five years, I know when you're nervous."

"I'm not nervous." He reiterates before taking another of those deep breaths. "I just... I dunno. I haven't been away from them for this long in like years. I know I talked to them every day, but it's not the same as being there."

"They haven't forgotten you."

I somehow manage to dodge his attempt to smack me on the arm, so he resorts to glaring at me instead. "That's not what I was trying to say."

"So what are you trying to say?" I ask as I pull the car into my parents driveway and shut off the engine. "Are you worried they won't be happy to see you?"

"No." He mumbles, which probably means he's at least partially concerned about it.

"They missed you." I tell him honestly. "They even made a little countdown calendar so they could cross off the days until you came back. They've been waiting for this since the moment you left."

"Really?"

"You'll see it when we go back to the house tonight, it's on the fridge. They brought it with them from L.A."

After one last breath to calm his nerves, he opens the passenger side door of the car and gets out. He waits for me to make my way over to him, and then we walk up to the front porch hand in hand. We already went over the plan in the car, how I was going to go in alone and pretend I was there to pick them up, and then he would come in a few minutes later. But it takes him a moment to let go of my hand so that I can open the front door.

"See you in a minute." I grin as I lean in and peck him lightly on the lips, and he nods as he stuffs his hands into the pockets of his jeans and watches me step into the house.

I'm halfway down the hall when I hear a triumphant shout of "Uno!" from the family room, which more than clues me in to the activity my mom chose to keep the kids occupied with. When I first walk into the room, they're all so engrossed in their game that no one even notices I'm standing here. In fact, my parents and Zoe seem to have managed to arrange their seating so that the only ones facing the entrance to the room are the three of them. And Asta, who is sitting on my mom's lap and is therefore the first one to see me.

"Daddy!" She beams happily, waving her arms in what she probably intended to be a 'come here' gesture. "I won last game."
"No, grandma won the last game." River corrects her.

"I'm not really playing. I'm only helping Asta make sure she picks the right cards." Mom explains good-naturedly. "She got most of them right all by herself, didn't you sweetheart?"

"I know my numbers to ten! Penny showed me how."

"Are we gonna go pick Tommy up now?" Asks Viggo, all but ready to throw his cards aside and leave, but his face falls when I shake my head and take a seat on the ground beside him.

"Later."

"But how much later?"

"How about you just finish your game, dude?" I suggest hopefully in an attempt to get him to refocus his attention on the cards in his hands so that he'll be less likely to spot anyone coming into the room behind him. "We've still got plenty of time."

It takes a lot of restraint on my part to stop myself from glancing over my shoulder every few seconds. I don't want to draw attention to the fact that I'm looking for something. Luckily, my dad catches my eye and does a pretty good job of keeping me silently updated on whether or not Tommy's in the room yet. When his smile suddenly grows noticeably wider, I have to bite my lip to keep myself from grinning. My eyes flit around the circle of people before me, waiting for one of them to look up and gasp in excitement. But they're all staring too intently at their cards and the card that was just placed on the pile in front of them!

Until Tommy clears his throat.

"Can I play?"

There's a sudden explosion of activity in the previously quiet room. Uno cards are scattered everywhere as Tommy's name is repeatedly shouted and screamed in excitement. I literally duck and cover my head for fear of being trampled when our kids get to their feet and charge towards him. All of them except Asta. She stays seated on my mom's lap, too shocked and confused by all the commotion to say or do anything. It's like she doesn't quite believe he's really here. She was told he wouldn't be, and so his presence doesn't make sense to her.

But as she watches her older siblings embrace him in a tangle of over-eager arms, to the point where he's almost knocked off his feet, she slowly accepts that it's really happening. He's really here. Her lower lip starts to tremble and her eyes brim with tears, and much to everyone's surprise she starts bawling.

"Aw, it's okay!" I console her, trying my best not to laugh at her over-emotional reaction, even though that's all I want to do right now.

This is just like what happened at pick up time on her first day of pre-school, only way more extreme. Tommy and I walked into the classroom to find her happily making playdough shapes with her new friends, and as soon as she saw us she burst into tears. Her teacher assured us that it happened with a lot of kids during their first week, and that she was pretty sure it stemmed from an overwhelming sense of relief that mommy and daddy (or in our case, dad and daddy) actually did come back, just like they said they would when they left them there that morning.

"Come here." She reaches up helplessly as I lift her into my arms and carry her across the family room.
Viggo frowns, letting go of Tommy to look over at his baby sister. "Why's she crying?"

"She's just happy." I tell him.

"She doesn't look happy." Remarks River skeptically as he watches me hand Asta to Tommy.

"Trust me, buddy, she's probably never been happier."

She wraps her little arms around his neck, burying her face in his shoulder while she cries, and he holds her tightly against him as he murmurs hushed words of comfort into her ear. Eventually she lifts her head, taking a few shuddering breaths and studying his face closely. I feel like I might cry when she places her hands on his cheeks, feeling them rise in a smile. Her fingers continue to explore his face, his nose and lips (and he kisses them playfully as they pass), and his hair. Until she's completely satisfied that he's not a figment of her imagination.

"I miss you." She sniffles weakly, draping her arms back around his neck as he kisses her on the forehead.

"I missed you, too." He tells her wholeheartedly.

"You gotta stay here now, 'kay?"

"Kay."

River steps forward and wraps his arms around Tommy's waist once again, and Viggo and Penny are quick to follow suit. Ezra stays back by me, but it doesn't look as though he feels unwelcome in the same group hug he was participating in only a moment ago. He seems happy, at ease, just like the rest of us.

I notice movement close beside me, and when I glance over to see what it is, I find my little sister standing beside me holding her cell phone out in front of her. On the screen is the exact same scene as the one before her, and on her face is a relaxed smile that wouldn't have been there only a couple of years ago. She didn't know how to react when she saw me or the kids being affectionate with Tommy, it confused her and made her uncomfortable. But now she's so used to it that she can genuinely appreciate an loving reunion like this.

"Can I get a copy of that?" I whisper to her.

"Can I put it on Instagram?" She counters shrewdly.

"Deal."

Chapter End Notes

I know in real life, TJR has a Metallica tattoo on his right wrist. But in FUBAR, the part of the tour where he got that tattoo done never happened. This is a basic mock-up of what I imagine his Taylor tattoo looks like:
When I left L.A. three weeks ago, I honestly had no clue what to expect. I didn't know how the tour would go, or how I would feel during and after it. I didn't know if it would make me feel better or worse. I didn't know if it would make me feel anything at all. But I hoped that it would. I had to hope, because it felt like it was some last ditch effort to get my shit together and figure out what the hell I was supposed to do next, and I didn't want to waste it. I wasn't naive enough to think that I'd leave for a few weeks and come back a totally together person with my entire life mapped out... but I wanted to change.

I needed to change, and I think maybe I did.

One thing that didn't change, and that I doubt will ever change, is how much I missed my family while I was gone. I knew I would, but I underestimated how much. Just like I underestimated how good it would feel to be with them again. It's not like I had a totally shitty time on the road; it was a lot of fun, the guys were great, and it was good for me to get out there and play live again. But any time I had even a second to myself, I missed them. I missed Taylor. I seriously don't know how to be away from him for more than a day or two without it hurting. Like physically hurting. It's always been that way, but I haven't had to deal with it in so long now. I guess I forgot how bad it can get.

It's done now, though. I did what I needed to do, I figured some stuff out, and now we can all just... move on.

I hope.
I don't think I'm gonna know for sure until we get back to L.A. and our lives go back to normal. Or as normal as they ever get, anyway. Being here in Tulsa isn't real life, not to me. It's like a vacation, even if I don't find it all that relaxing to be around the entire Hanson clan for extended periods of time. Don't get me wrong, most of them are pretty cool, and they treat me like less and less of an interloper every time they see me. But I feel like they're always gonna think of me as the guy who corrupted one of their own, stole him and their grandkids away to another state, and changed all of their lives forever. It's easier (and more convenient) for them to go back to seeing Taylor as the same son and brother he was before. They have those memories of him, it doesn't require them to adjust their views too much. But me? Let's just say it's been a challenge trying to get them to see who I really am.

Trying to let them see who I really am.

It's like I constantly have my guard up, even if it's only a little. Because I'm convinced that deep down none of them actually believes I'm good enough for him. Which is fair, because I don't believe it, either. I probably never will. But for some fucked up reason, he believes it. I'm what he wants, and until that changes, I'm not going anywhere.

"How was tour?" Walker asks me as I take a seat on the couch beside Taylor, with Asta still in my arms.

Her brothers and sister have already gone back to their card game with Zoe, but I have a feeling Asta's not going to let me put her down or leave her sight any time soon.

"It was good." Judging by the expectant looks on his and Diana's faces, 'good' isn't an adequate answer. Apparently I'm expected to elaborate. "It took a little getting used to, 'cause it been so long since I was out on the road and everything, but it was fun. I liked the band I was playing with, and their music was good..." I don't know what else to say if that isn't enough. "It helped."

Shit.

Shoulda quit while I was behind.

"Helped?" Frowns Diana. "Helped with what?"

"Um... nothing." That's not gonna cut it. "Just... you know..." No, they don't know, which is why they're both so confused. "I'd just been kinda..."

"Restless." Taylor interjects in an effort to dig me out of this hole I'm in. "Right?"

Wrong. "Right. I was... restless."

Unfortunately, that explanation only makes their worried frowns worse. "Restless how?"

"Like I used to get when I hadn't been on the road in a long time." Clarifies Taylor. "You remember what we were like anytime we were home for long periods, we'd start going crazy and taking you all down with us."

"I remember." Walker chuckles softly, seemingly less concerned than he was before. Diana doesn't look too convinced, though. "Ike and Zac still get that way. But I've gotta say, you were always the worst."

"Oh, I'm totally aware. I never tried to hide it."

"Do you think you'll do any more tours with this band?" Questions Diana, trying to act like she's just
showing an interest when really she's probably trying to figure out if I'm gonna abandon her son and grandkids again soon.

"I doubt it. I was only covering for their regular bass player 'cause he messed up his hand. They probably won't need me to do any more shows."

"And you're definitely not going to be working with Adam Lambert again?"

"Mom!"

"I was just wondering!" She exclaims innocently, holding her hands up in defense. "Honestly, sometimes I think you and your brothers all got together and took an oath never to tell me anything that's going on in your lives once you turned eighteen."

Walker rolls his eyes as he puts his arm around her shoulders and kisses her on the cheek. "There was no oath, honey. It's an incurable disease that every man contracts by the time he turns twenty, not a personal attack on you."

"Well, I don't know what's wrong with you all. I always told my mother everything."

"Because you're a woman, and women love to talk." He teases her. "They cannot be stopped; I know, I've tried."

She scowls, pretending to push him away. "We're not the only ones who cannot be stopped. I wish you had a mute button sometimes."

"No you don't. You find me charming and irresistible, always have." Proclaims Walker confidently. "It's not your fault, it's a trait all Hanson men are born with."

I can't help but glance at Taylor, and of course he's smiling smugly back at me. Charming and irresistible my ass. "Must've skipped a generation."

"Whatever." He replies dismissively. "You can't live without me and you know it."

I do know it.

"So, what do you guys have planned for the rest of the day?" Asks Walker. "Are you thinking of taking the kids out somewhere, or just heading back to the house to relax?"

"We haven't really made it past going out for lunch." Taylor shrugs, looking to me for suggestions. "What do you want to do?"

"I."

"I wanna go to the park." Asta suddenly pipes up. "Can we go to the park?"

I smile down at her as she snuggles closer to me, holding on tightly to my wrist with both of her little hands to keep is wrapped securely around her. "Sure."

I'm probably going to be responding with 'sure' and 'yes' to pretty much anything she wants for at least a few days. I haven't stopped feeling guilty for leaving her the way I did since the front door closed behind me three weeks ago!

"You're more than welcome to come over for dinner this evening, if you don't feel like eating out again or cooking." Offers Diana, much to Walker's amusement.
"I'm sure they want to spend some time together as a family."

"Yeah, mom. It's a really nice offer, and we'll definitely wanna take you up on it another time, but I think we're probably just gonna hang out at home tonight."

"We're going home tonight? To my real bedroom?" Asks Asta, gazing up at me with those big, hopeful brown eyes. They might not be blue like her dad's, but they still have the same effect on me.

"Not tonight, bug." I tell her apologetically. "We're gonna stay in Tulsa a little longer."

She sighs dejectedly, resting her head against my chest again. "I miss my house."

I miss our house, too. And I was there yesterday!

But it wasn't the same being there without them. I thought it would be a relief to have the place all to myself after being surrounded by other people for weeks, I was actually excited to have a night at home alone before I had to pack up and get on a plane to Tulsa. It was too empty, though. Too quiet. And quiet in our house is only a relief for so long. Continuous quiet is unsettling, because it's generally a sign that somebody is doing something they shouldn't.

I used to love my quiet time, my 'Tommy Time'. I needed it. Being around other people for too long, even people I loved, left me feeling drained. But at some point over the last few years that changed. I'm not saying that I don't ever need time to myself; I doubt any parent on the planet would turn down the chance to have ten minutes a day of total solitude. But it's not like it used to be. Now whenever I have to go without Taylor or the kids around for too long, I don't know what to do with myself. I might be okay for a couple of hours, but then I get totally antsy. It doesn't feel right. I guess I don't know how to be without them now. That's not my life, that's not my 'norm'.

I don't want it to be.

This is my norm now. Taking my kids out to lunch with my husband, letting them eat more of what's on my plate than what's on their own, using every napkin on the table to mop up the glass of water that Viggo knocked over, then asking Asta a dozen times whether she needs to use the bathroom before we leave and having her repeatedly tell me no... only to change her mind as soon as we pull out of the parking lot.

It's crazy-making, and unrelenting, and totally fucking exhausting.

And it's mine.

After lunch (and stopping at Walmart so Asta can use the bathroom), we take the kids over to their favorite park in Tulsa. It's one of those awesome places where they can play happily for hours, until they completely tire themselves out, and all Taylor and I have to do is stay within eyesight and earshot and let them do their thing. Except that they've only just got me back after a lengthy absence, so I'm required to play with them for a while. But I'm not opposed to that, because I've missed them as much as they've missed me.

Even after they've ditched me in favor of going off and playing some game that I can't even begin to understand because I'm not seven, Asta continues to come over every five minutes and checks to make sure that I'm still present. It makes me feel like shit to know that she's so anxious about me disappearing, like I've planted this seed of doubt in her mind. I never wanted her, or any of them, to doubt that I'd come back.

There's no way I wouldn't.
It still kinda surprises me sometimes that I feel the way I do about them, that this is my life and I fucking love it. I never would've thought that someday I'd be sitting on a park bench (in Tulsa, of all places) with a guy I love more than I've ever loved anyone or anything, and that we'd be watching our kids playing. Kids that aren't mine biologically but who still feel like mine. And even if I could've somehow imagined that life would land me here, I don't think I ever would've believed that I would be this content. Contentment, for me, used to come from being alone, or maybe being with a few close friends. It came from drinking beer, and playing video games or watching movies, and not feeling obligated to anyone.

Now I've got obligations coming out of my a-... ears.

And I've never been happier.

Okay, well, maybe that's not true. I mean, I am happy right now, it's hard not to be when I've got Taylor's arm around me and I can hear our kids laughing and shouting as they run and climb all over the playground in front of us. But it's also hard to ignore the looks that some of the other parents are shooting our way. It's like I can feel how badly one of those nosey bitch moms wants to come over here and say something about how the two of us sitting so close is "inappropriate". She doesn't need to say it to our faces, though, her disgusted scowl says it all. And I really wanna flip her off or something right now, but I know that's not an option. The only option I have, besides leaving, is pretending not to notice her. Or any of them.

By the end of the day we're all totally wiped out. We pick up takeout on the way back to the house, and the kids all start falling asleep in the middle of the movie that it took them half an hour to agree on. Even though it's a little earlier than they would normally go to bed, none of them puts up a fight when Taylor tells them it's time to brush their teeth. But once they're all tucked in and the lights are out, it takes forever to get Asta to fall asleep. Again, it's because she's afraid that I won't be here when she wakes up. And again, I feel like such an asshole for putting her through this.

Despite fighting it for way longer than she usually does, Asta eventually drifts off to sleep while making me promise for the twentieth time that I won't go anywhere. I sneak out of her room as quietly as possible to find Taylor waiting for me just outside of her bedroom door, and we wordlessly head into the kitchen to get a couple of beers from the fridge. He follows me without question as I walk over to the front door and open it, stepping outside into the balmy evening air. There's no front porch to sit on or anything like that, but there are some steps that make for pretty decent seating. They might be made of wood, but I still feel way more comfortable sitting on them than I feel sitting in that living room.

Or anywhere else in this house, really.

I don't know why I'm uncomfortable here, it's not like I personally have any bad memories of this place. I didn't grow up here, I should feel totally neutral about it. Even Taylor doesn't have any negative associations with this house, not that he's told me about anyway. Yeah, this was his home when he was a scared, confused pre-teen trying to deny his sexuality, but it's also the house he was living in when he wrote some of his first songs, when he learned to play the piano, and when he found out that he'd finally gotten a record deal at the ripe old age of thirteen.

The cartoons he and his brothers drew on the walls are still there, faded but clear enough to make out. Most of the furniture is left over from when his family lived here, too. Apparently, when they bought a bigger house after the band first became famous, they pretty much bought all new furniture to go in it. The couch in the living room is the one he probably sat and watched Saturday morning cartoons on as a kid. The bunk beds that Viggo and River are sharing are the same ones that he and Ike shared when they were young. The bed we sleep in is his parent's old bed, which was kinda
kinky the first time we fucked in it, just like with his dad's car last night. But when we're not fucking it's just... weird.

Don't ask me how that works, 'cause I have no fucking clue.

"What're you thinking about?" He asks quietly, and I try to act casual as I shrug and take a sip of my beer.

"I was just thinking that it's kinda nice out here." I tell him, avoiding his eyes and opting to watch the fireflies flickering in the dusk. "I think this might be my favorite place in Oklahoma."

"This house?"

"No, this step."

He laughs softly as he drinks from his own bottle. "I can't tell if that was sarcasm or not."

"Not."

"So what's so special about this step?"

"I dunno." I reply honestly. "It's just... different out here. Almost feels like I'm not in Oklahoma anymore."

"You really hate this state, huh?" He smirks at me.

"Not just this state. I don't really like any of the states in the middle of the country. Or the south. I mostly just like the west coast. And Arizona's okay... and some of the east coast, I guess. But mostly the west coast. I wish we could like... cut right down the state lines of Washington, Oregon and California, and just float that part of the country out to sea."

"Wow."

"And it'd be cool if we could float it closer to Hawaii, 'cause I like Hawaii, too."

Shaking his head at what he seems to think is my totally irrational disdain for this part of the country, he pats me condescendingly on the knee. "Maybe you should write a letter to Obama about that, baby."

"Maybe I will."

"I'm sorry you have to spend so much time in a place you can't stand."

Damn.

Now I feel like a total dick.

"I'm only half serious." I lie as convincingly as I can. "It's just weird being here, you know?"

"Weird how?" He frowns curiously.

"Well, like... in L.A. I never even have to think twice about kissing you or holding your hand in public most of the time. No one cares. We can go out with the kids as a family and it's no big deal. But here it's different. People actually stare at us when we hold hands, they can't believe we'd do something like that in front of other people. And when we go out with the kids we get dirty looks, it's like they think we're hurting them somehow. I swear half of them want to call social services on us. I
hate it. I just wanna scream at them to mind their own fucking business, but I can't with the kids around."

"I didn't know it bothered you so much." He puts his beer down and scoots a little closer to me on the step, curling his arm around me, and I gratefully lean into him. "You're always the one telling me to ignore that kind of thing."

"I guess I'm telling both of us to ignore it."

"I thought you didn't care what anyone thinks of you?"

"I don't." I declare honestly. "I don't give a fuck what people think of me, not unless it affects you or the kids. But this stuff is different. It's not me they're judging, it's us. It's our family, and I'm not okay with that."

"Me either." He sighs sadly as I rest my head on his shoulder. "It's getting better, though. Maybe Oklahoma isn't anywhere near as accepting of us as California, but people are more tolerant than they used to be."

"I don't want them to fucking tolerate us, I don't even want them to approve. I just want them to get the hell over themselves and focus on their own empty little lives."

"That's just it, though. Their lives probably are empty, and they have nothing better to do than judge us so that they won't have to think about their own mind-numbingly uninspiring existence."

"I guess."

"You won't have to tolerate being tolerated soon, anyway. We'll be home in a week, and then... everything can go back to normal." He assures me, though for some reason he doesn't sound all that certain of what he's just said.

Fuck, I hope he's not gonna try and talk me into staying here longer so he can keep working on the album.

I will, but I don't want to.

I hear him take a deep breath, I feel his body tense against mine, and then my body tenses as a result. I can almost hear him ask me that dreaded question before the words even leave his mouth, and I feel like a total douche bag for sitting here and willing him not to ask it.

"If that's what you want?"

Wait... what? "If what's what I want?"

"For things to go back to normal." He clarifies apprehensively.

I lift my head off of his shoulder so that I can look him in the eyes and try to figure out what the hell he's talking about. "Why wouldn't I want that?"

"Because... it wasn't what you wanted when you left. That's why you left. And I don't wanna just pretend it never happened and go back to the way things were if it's going to make you feel like you felt before. I want you to do what you want to do-"

"It is what I want to do." I promise him sincerely. "I didn't leave because I didn't like the way things were, I left because I didn't like the way I was."
"Exactly! And if we go home and everything goes back to the way it was before, you'll go back to feeling the way you did before."

"I don't think I will." I shake my head at him sadly as I turn a little in my seat on the step to fully face him. "I'm sorry I keep doing such a shitty job of explaining stuff to you."

"You don't-"

"I do, otherwise you wouldn't have said any of what you just said."

"But-"

He stops immediately when I place my hand over his mouth, and I wait for a moment to make sure that he's not going to try to talk again before slowly lowering it. "I love our life. I love our version of 'normal'. You and the kids were never the problem. I mean, yeah, I was upset about us needing to put the baby plans on hold indefinitely, it wasn't how I wanted things to be, and it hurt... it hurts. But you know there was way more going on for me than that. And it's been going on for months, since before I even first brought up the idea of us having a baby."

"I know." He acknowledges, sympathetically stroking my thigh.

"It's like... ever since I was a kid, and I first started playing guitar and decided I wanted to be in a band, I thought I had to be performing or recording for it to actually count. Like playing just for me wasn't enough, it didn't make me a musician. I was only a real musician if people gave a damn about my music, if I could pay the bills just by playing shows and selling CDs or whatever. And it took me years to get to that point, to feel like I'd finally done it, to be able to quit my shitty job and just go out on stage and do what I loved doing and have people get it... so when that changed, it was pretty fucking scary. I wasn't worried about not being able to pay the bills or anything, 'cause we were living together, and you were still touring and recording, so I knew we'd be fine. But I hated that I wasn't contributing at all, I couldn't because I wasn't working. And all those little side projects I did were fun, but they never made much money. And the longer I went without a decent, paying gig, the more I started to feel like... like I was losing it, you know? Like this amazing thing I'd wanted and worked for my whole life was disappearing right in front of me. But then I got the call about this job... they didn't even ask me to audition, Taylor, they just wanted to know when I could start rehearsing! It felt like a second chance, like if I took the job and didn't fuck it up, maybe I'd get another job, and another, and then I could go back to doing what I loved and everything would be okay. But it turns out... that's not what I want."

"You didn't make any difference, you didn't do anything wrong-"

"But it didn't feel that way to me. It felt like I must have done something wrong, or not done something I should've done, or that I just wasn't fucking good enough, so nothing I did or didn't do would make any fucking difference. I watched everyone I'd worked with move on to bigger and better things, and I started thinking that there must be something wrong with me if I couldn't do the same. But then I got the call about this job... they didn't even ask me to audition, Taylor, they just wanted to know when I could start rehearsing! It felt like a second chance, like if I took the job and didn't fuck it up, maybe I'd get another job, and another, and then I could go back to doing what I loved and everything would be okay. But it turns out... that's not what I want."

He doesn't look happy, or doubtful, or even surprised by what I've just said, only confused. "I don't understand."
"I don't really understand, either." I laugh quietly, giving a helpless shrug. "It just kinda hit me while I was on the road... I don't wanna do it anymore. My first tour with Adam was my first real tour, and it was incredible. And I figured that must be what it's like to be a 'real' musician, that must be what it feels like to be on tour and play music every night. But it's not. That tour was like... a one in a million experience; I won the fucking lottery the day he hired me. But it was never the same after that. It was never bad, it just wasn't ever as good. And this tour was a lot of fun, and I loved playing shows, but it still wasn't... enough. It wasn't enough to make me want to do it again, to make me leave you and the kids again. Honestly... I don't think any job ever will be."

"Tommy-"

"It's okay." I cut him off before he can try to talk what he thinks is sense into me. "I'm okay. I thought about it a lot while I was gone, and I feel like I finally accepted it. Like maybe I'd been stuck in this loop or something, going through the first four stages of grief over and over, and I finally got out of it."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure. I'm not saying I'll never tour again, but... that part doesn't matter. What matters is that I know I can do it. I'd convinced myself that I couldn't, that I sucked, and if Adam didn't want to work with me then no one would. But now I know that's not true. If I decide I wanna play shows again someday, I'll figure it out when the time comes. But even if I don't want to play shows or tour anymore, it really doesn't matter. I was so fucking wrong all those years, thinking that I had to be performing or recording to be a 'real' musician. It's bullshit. The only thing that stops me from being a musician is if I stop making music. I don't need to play for thousands of people, or even just one... I just need to keep playing. So that's what I'm gonna do."

At first I'm not sure if he believes that I'm really okay with this, that I've made peace with it and realized what it is that truly makes me happy. So I hold his concerned stare determinedly until he finally begins to smile. He looks so relieved, and I'm sure it has a lot to do with knowing that I'm not planning to up and leave again anytime soon. But I know there's more to it than that.

He's not just relieved for himself, he's relieved for me.

"You're kind of amazing, you know that?"

I can't even look at him anymore, so I turn my attention to picking at the label on my beer bottle. "No, I'm not."

"I think you are."

"Why? 'Cause I figured out that the thing I thought I wanted for the last twenty years isn't what I actually want?" I chuckle softly before taking a sip of my drink. "That doesn't make me amazing, it makes me slow. I should've figured this shit out months ago, then I wouldn't have put you and the kids through all of this."

"You didn't put us through anything." He insists wholeheartedly, trying to force me to face him again. But I'm a stubborn mother fucker, so he's outta luck. "I mean it. You did what you needed to do, and that's okay. It's always okay. And yeah, I think you're amazing for actually taking the time to stop and think about what the hell it is that makes you happy, and what's holding you back from it, because most people never bother. They just keep doing what they're doing, no matter how miserable it makes them, and they think it'll all just work itself out eventually. But you knew that wasn't gonna happen for you, you knew you couldn't keep going the way you were. I know you think that you did this awful, selfish thing by leaving, but it's not true. It wasn't only what was best
for you, it was best for all of us. Because watching you doubt yourself for months, watching you convince yourself that you weren’t good enough, and seeing how lost you were... that was way harder than being without you for a few weeks. So if you hadn't gone, if all that stuff you were going through had gotten worse..."

He shakes his head sadly at the idea of it, and even I have to take a breath as I think of the path of self-loathing and resentment I was headed down less than a month ago. I can see it so much more clearly now, but when I was on it I couldn't see far enough ahead to even be sure that I was going anywhere at all. It was like I kept glancing over my shoulder, watching the light behind me fading, until where I'd come from was almost as unclear as where I was going. And that fucking terrified me.

That was when I knew I couldn't keep going the way I had been. And even though I'd gone too far to go back, I could still get the hell off of that path and find a new one. Or make a new one.

His fingertips graze along my jaw line, turning my face towards his, and it causes goosebumps to rise all over my skin despite the fact that it's still so warm outside. "I'm glad you found your way out."

I feel the same sense of relief that I saw in his eyes just a few minutes ago, and it's like every last shred of tension evaporates from my body in an instant as I practically melt into his touch. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"Waiting around for my sorry ass."

He smiles flirtatiously as his forehead falls gently against mine. "Your ass is always worth waiting for."
I love holidays.

Mostly because of the food, but I hold a special place in my heart for the ones involving explosives, too. I've taken a lot of crap in my life for being "feminine", and maybe I do happen to enjoy certain things that are more traditionally thought of as "girly". Blowing shit up is not one of them. I guess I have kind of a destructive streak, and I'm not referring to my self-destructive tendencies. I'm talking about smashing things, demolishing things, lighting them on fire and watching them burn. I don't do it very often, but whenever I get the chance to, I get an undeniable rush out of it.

I guess it's just nice to intentionally destroy something instead of doing it because I'm a klutz.

Fourth of July is kind of a big deal in the Hanson clan. Partly because it's an excuse for us all to get together and spend all day eating, drinking, and blaring music... but mostly because of the fireworks. The females of the family don't get nearly as excited about it as us men do. They sit around and play with sparklers, and they enjoy the firework display we put on at the end of the night, but they don't want to actually participate. They don't even really want us to participate, because they're convinced that at least one of us is going to wind up in the hospital. Their lack of faith in us is kind of insulting; we haven't blown ourselves up yet!

This is only the second Independence Day that Tommy and I have spent in Tulsa since I moved to L.A.. In some ways I wish we could come out here for every holiday, because I love spending them with my family, and the kids love seeing all of their cousins. It makes everything feel bigger and more exciting. But aside from the fact that Tommy's family likes to see us on holidays, too, I know that these get togethers aren't exactly Tommy's idea of a good time. For the rest of us it's relaxing, but for him it's pretty stressful. I've told him repeatedly that he doesn't need to try so hard, but it's like he's convinced that his every move is being scrutinized. Which is ridiculous because they're all too busy enjoying themselves to judge him.

Okay, maybe not all of them.
Kate still barely acknowledges him. And that's normally not a big deal, because there are so many of us at these family events that no one would probably notice if neither of us interacted with her at all. Except maybe Zac. But he's done trying to build bridges for us at this point, it's a waste of his time and energy. No one is fighting or making snide comments, so we just... live and let live.

Pam does better now. It's not like she loves us or anything, but we've spent enough time around each other because of the kids that we've figured out how to co-exist peacefully. She'll still question our parenting from time to time, but I do my best to let it go and remember that she just wants to feel as though she has a say in how her grandchildren are being raised. Tommy tends to take it a little harder than I do. Not that he particularly cares if she thinks he's a good parent or not, but it's understandably irritating to feel like you're being critiqued on the way you treat your children. I guess Pam doesn't see it that way, because Pam still doesn't see them as his children. She never will.

I'm not sure if any of my family will, honestly.

They don't make a big deal about it, or make Tommy feel unwelcome at all. They treat him like he's my partner, and for the most part they respect our relationship. But if one of our kids is hurt, or upset, or asking someone for permission to do something, I'm the one who gets called on to handle it, not Tommy. Which is probably why he can't wait to get the hell out of here and go home tomorrow. Hopefully this party is the last round of Hanson Hell he'll have to endure for this trip...

"How long until the fireworks?" River sighs impatiently as he watches Zac and I unpacking another box of aerial shells.

"It's not dark yet, Riv."

"Yeah, dude." Concurs Zac, inspecting each of the shells individually, as though they're priceless jewels. "It'd be a tragic waste to start setting them off before the sun goes down."

"But I'm bored."

"I thought your grandpa gave you some smoke balls." I remind him.

He rolls his eyes at me in silent disgust. "Smoke balls are for babies."

"No, sparklers are for babies." Smirks Mac as he tosses River some bottle rockets. "Go make some noise."

"Make sure you ask a grown up for help!" I call out after him as he races away excitedly, but I doubt he heard me over all of the shouting he was doing to get his cousin's attention. "Great. Now my kid is going to blow himself up."

"Oh, come on!" Ike scoffs condescendingly. "You were younger than him the first time you launched a bottle rocket."

"Yeah, and I almost lost an eye."

"Well, lucky for you, your kids are smarter than you are. Or ever have been."

"And yet I'm still smarter than you. So at least I have that going for me, right?"

The scowl on his face is totally worth the mortar tube he throws at my head, and I smile to myself as I go back to unpacking and sorting various explosives. But when I glance up for a moment and my gaze settles on Tommy, my good mood takes a hit. It's not that he looks upset or even lonely; he's hanging out with Nikki, as he tends to do at Hanson family events whenever he and I get separated.
for whatever reason. The two of them almost immediately bonded over being "outsiders". They aren't really made to feel like outsiders by anyone else, but compared to the other in-laws in the family, they've been in our lives the shortest amount of time.

Since Tommy had no interest in setting up fireworks, I had to leave him to fend for himself with a bunch of females. But as long as he has a beer in his hand and Nikki or Avie to talk to, he usually does okay. I just wish that everything could be simpler, for all our sakes. I wish my mom didn't have to flit back and forth between Kate and Pam's side of the yard and Tommy's in order to make everyone feel included, or that Tommy felt as though he could come and hang out over here, even if it was just to watch and not to handle explosives. But because Mac is over here, and he's still uncomfortable with the idea of me being gay, Tommy probably thinks he would be ruining our brotherly bonding.

I've tried to find a way to make Mac more accepting of our relationship, but it's not something I can force him to feel. It's also not something he's going to get used to by avoiding it whenever he can, though. But I can't make him spend time with us as a couple, or even a family. He moved to L.A. last year to pursue a career in acting, but we still hardly ever see him unless it's one of the kid's birthdays. It's like he thinks that if he doesn't see me with Tommy, he can pretend everything is "normal".

Jess doesn't do much better with the whole situation, but she tries. She wants things to be okay, and she's willing to endure the tension in order to attempt to move on and accept the way things are. It still hurts to see how difficult it is for her. For both of them. They were so close to Natalie, she was never not family in Mac's eyes, and she was one of Jess's closest friends. I respect that completely, and I don't expect them to ever forget her or how important she was to everyone in our family. But they don't need to forget her or miss her any less to accept Tommy as my husband and their brother-in-law. I'm not sure if they know that, though. And I'm not sure that having me tell them is going to help them figure it out.

"I'm gonna grab another drink." I tell my brothers, standing up and brushing some dirt from my jeans. "Anyone want anything?"

"I'll take another beer." Ike replies quickly as Mac shakes his head, and Zac tips the Dr Pepper can beside him upside down to demonstrate that it is empty.

"Got it."

I make my way across the yard, narrowly avoiding a water war being waged between my kids and my nieces and nephews. Well, the ones who are old enough. Hans and Abe are busy being fussed over by their moms and grandma, and Odette is gleefully attempting to pluck daisies (and mostly ending up with fistfuls of grass) from the ground at Nikki's feet. It's impossible for me not to notice how intently Tommy is watching her, even as he carries on a conversation with Nikki and sips his beer. And it's impossible for my heart not to ache at the painfully obvious look of longing on his face.

"Hey, ladies." I greet them cheerfully, trying to pretend everything is totally fine. Because I know that's exactly what he's going to do, and what he needs me to do. At least until we're no longer surrounded by my entire family.

"Who you callin' lady?" Tommy scowls at me playfully, dodging my attempt to kiss him. "Just 'cause I'm not hanging out with a bunch of idiots who literally wanna play with fire."

"Who you callin' idiot?"
He raises a cocky eyebrow at me before giving an indifferent shrug. "Which one of us is trying to blow their own head off for fun?"

"I'm not gonna blow my head off. Or anyone else's." I protest indignantly. "I know what I'm doing, I've done it a hundred times before."

"Which means that every time you successfully set off a firework without killing yourself, the odds that you'll die doing it the next time increase."

"That's what I told Ike!" Exclaims Nikki, like this illogical logic of theirs is supposed to make some kind of sense. "But he never listens."

Tommy shakes his head in mutual disapproval. "Men."

"Amen!" Nikki laughs softly as the two of the tap the necks of their beer bottles together.

"Mind if I borrow my wife for a few minutes?" I ask Nikki, tugging on Tommy's arm until he relents and gets out of his lawn chair. "I need him to help me... get some stuff."

"Yeah, sure." She smirks knowingly. "You guys go 'get some' stuff."

"That was really subtle." Tommy teases me as I lead him towards the house and away from everyone else. "I think she totally fell for it."

"You know what? There's only one thing I care about right now, and it's definitely not how convinced Nikki was by my lame excuse to get you alone."

"What the hell got into you?" He laughs bemusedly, following me through my parent's family room and into the quiet, empty kitchen.

"You." I inform him plainly, turning to face him so quickly that he almost walks right into me. That's fine, though. The closer he is, the better. "You know you can't taunt me like that and expect me not to be turned on by it."

"I taunt you all the damn time! You make it so fucking easy."

With a nod of acknowledgement, I back him up against the kitchen counter. I don't even have to touch him; I take a step towards him and he takes a step back, never breaking the stare we're locked in. "That's why I'm in a near constant state of arousal whenever I'm around you."

"That's why?" He asks with a wicked gleam in his eyes as I pin him between my body and the cabinet behind him. "And here I was thinking it was 'cause you have absolutely no self control."

There he goes again, making me want him even more simply by mocking me.

As soon as my lips meet his, it's like I completely forget where we are. Or maybe I just want to forget. We've barely had any time alone together all week. On his first night at the house, Asta woke up crying because she thought he wasn't there. The only way we could settle her down before she woke everyone else up was to let her sleep in our bed. But she's still so paranoid about him leaving again that she refuses to sleep in her own bed for fear that she'll wake up and he'll be gone. We've tried moving her once she's asleep, but she wakes up every single time! So we let her sleep with us, between us. And if either of us so much as attempts to get off of the bed, she wakes up and wants to know where we're going, so we haven't even been able to sneak off and fool around in another room! We've warned her that once we get back to L.A. she'll have to go back to sleeping in her own bed again, but that's still one whole night away...
"Can't we just go lock ourselves in the basement, or a bathroom, or like... a closet or something?" Whines Tommy pleadingly as I kiss my way along the edge of his jaw, giving a teasing nip to his earlobe before continuing down to his neck. "Or we could use your dad's car again..."

"Don't tempt me."

He groans faintly, turning his face towards me as his mouth eagerly seeks mine. "We should volunteer to go to the store."

"For what?"

"I don't know... lube?"

I can't help but laugh at his suggestion, but I also can't stop kissing him. "I knew this party was lacking something."

"Please?" He sighs hopelessly, dragging his short nails down my chest in a way he knows will drive me crazy, and then hooking his fingers in the belt loops of my jeans to pull me even closer.

"Even if we could somehow come up with something to go buy that my mom hasn't already bought or made, there's no way Asta's gonna let you leave this party without her."

"We can sneak out." He proposes with a grin, pecking me on the lips. "No one has to know."

"No one has to know what?" Asks Zac as he breezes into the kitchen, completely unaffected by and unapologetic about the fact that he just interrupted us.

"That you're a cock-blocking doucheb-" Begins Tommy in a mumble, but I quickly cover his mouth with my hand to silence the rest of his statement. And thankfully Zac was too busy rummaging around in the fridge to hear him anyway.

"Nothing. We were just... uh..."

"Making out?" Zac offers smugly as he grabs an obscenely large pack of cheese slices and shuts the door. "I would say not to worry, and that I won't tell anyone, but everyone pretty much knows what you're doing in here anyway, so..."

"What?" I squeak in mortification. "How?!"

"Well, let's see. You offered to get us drinks and never delivered, and you were last seen disappearing in here together for no apparent reason and then failing to come back outside again within a decent amount of time." He shrugs nonchalantly. "We're not stupid."

Tommy coughs in a half-assed effort to disguise a "yeahyouare", clearing his throat a couple of times while Zac rolls his eyes. "Sorry, that barbeque smoke has been getting to me all afternoon."

"Aww, poor TommyJoe. I sure hope you don't choke to death or anything."

"Play nice, you two." I warn them semi-seriously.

"We are playing nice." Zac assures me with a sweet smile, patting Tommy on the back a little harder than necessary. "If we weren't, I'd have threatened to light a Roman Candle and shove it up his."

"Is that cheese? I love cheese." I cut him off quickly, snatching the pack out of his hand. "I bet dad's finished cooking the burgers by now, so we should probably get out there before everyone else eats them all."
"If they all get eaten, we could always go to the store and buy some more..." Tommy suggests innocently.

"It's cute that either of you thinks mom would ever run out of food. None of us are getting out of here without our share of leftovers; we're gonna be eating hotdogs and potato salad until Labor day."

With enough cheese to feed the entire city, the three of us head out into the back yard again. I wasn't wrong about the food being ready, and everyone drops whatever activity they were previously engaged in and starts hovering around the barbeque live vultures. The kids get to pick what they want to eat before the adults, because even though we're all just as hungry as they are, we're (supposedly) more patient than they are.

Once everyone has piled their plates high with food, that obvious but unmentionable segregation resumes. I try to ignore it and focus on the people who have chosen to sit and eat on 'our side' of the invisible line down the center of the yard, but it's not easy. Zac has to sit with Kate, and since dad has decided to sit with me and Tommy, mom very courteously sits with Pam. We get Avie and Ike, they get Mac, Jess and Zoe. We get Ike and Nikki's kids, they get Kate and Zac's. Penny and Viggo want to sit with Shep and Junia, while River and Ezra choose to stay with us.

Asta still wants to be wherever Tommy is, so that's a no brainer.

I can't help wondering if it'll always be this way. I don't expect that Kate will ever be okay with Tommy's presence at family events, or with me in general. But I want to believe that someday, hopefully not too far from now, the people I love won't have to choose sides. Rationally, I know it's not my fault. Maybe it was, initially, because my choices were the cause of all of the angst that fractured our family. But I've since done everything in my power to repair any damage I caused, and my attempts to make peace have mostly been successful. I'm not holding grudges and refusing to forgive.

I do, however, refuse to beg for forgiveness anymore.

I've done my part. I've waved my white flag and compromised as much as I can possibly stand to. If it's not enough, if it's never enough... I guess I'm just going to have to live with that.

"Out of everyone here, who do you think would win in a hot dog eating contest?" Avie muses aloud, shaking me out of my thoughts. From the way she's looking right at me, I get the feeling that was exactly what she was trying to do. "My money is on Mac."

Dad shakes his head in disagreement, swallowing a mouthful of potato before making his argument. "Zac, no question. Mac might have a bigger mouth, but Zac eats much faster."

"My dad can shove a whole hot dog in his mouth in one go!" Declares River proudly, causing both Ike and Tommy to almost choke on their food. "Show 'em, dad!"

"Uh... maybe another time, dude. I already ate most of mine and I don't really feel like having another one right now."

"Tay's actually pretty good at chugging stuff, too." Ike informs us all before I can even try to shift the subject away from the various tricks I can perform with my mouth. "It doesn't even matter what it is; water, soda, beer... I can do like half a can, but then I end up with the rest of it all down my shirt."

"I'm trying to learn how." River tells him. "Wanna see?"

"Riv, maybe that's not such a..."
As usual, my kid has decided to tune me out entirely and do what he wants to do instead. He gets about three gulps into his Coke before he starts choking and spits it all over Ezra, who then drops his plate of food all over the picnic blanket in surprise.

"Dude!"

River cringes apologetically, wiping his mouth on his sleeve until Nikki passes him her napkin to use instead. "Sorry! I told you I was still just learning."

"You'll get there." I encourage him. "It's all about timing, it's hard to do when you're a kid."

"I'm almost ten, so I'm almost not a kid anymore."

"You're almost nine." Ezra corrects him, still trying to pick his food up off of the blanket we're all seated on.

"So? Nine is right before ten, so I'm almost ten!"

"Fine, then I'm almost fourteen." His brother challenges him childishly.

"No, you're not." I object in horror. "I'm not old enough to have an almost fourteen year old son!"

"You're not really old enough to have an almost thirteen year old son." Remarks Ike unthinkingly, earning himself a smack on the arm from both dad and Nikki. "But you look old enough."

"Gee, thanks."

Nikki rolls her eyes at him as she shakes her head. "Great job, honey. You totally dug yourself out of that hole."

"I don't think he looks old." Frowns River, cocking his head to the side and carefully scrutinizing my appearance. It's stupid for me to feel self-conscious, he's just a kid, but I can't help squirming a little while he conducts his silent appraisal of my face. "He has a lot of hair. And he never wears a suit. My other friend's dads wear suits, and they don't have much hair."

"Well, that's one thing you won't have to worry about." Dad nudges me playfully. "Hansons-"

"Have great hair." Drones Ike, having heard this statement too many times to count. "We know. It was kind of a focal point of our careers when we were younger, remember? It wasn't 'those three kids with awesome harmonies', or 'those three kids who write all their own music and play their own instruments'. It was 'those three kids with long blond hair'."

"Who look like girls." I add resentfully.

"That was mostly just you, though." Avie points out bluntly.

"Shut up." I mutter, throwing a half eaten carrot stick at her head.

"Poor Taylor." Coos Tommy, shifting closer to me on the blanket and wrapping his arm around my waist. "I think you were a very pretty girl, if that helps."

"A little." I pout until he smiles and kisses me on the cheek.

By the time everyone is done eating, the sun is well on its way to setting. Which is good, because the kids are all starting to get tired and cranky, and we're almost out of sparklers! I've made myself so comfortable with Tommy that I almost don't want to get up and finish getting the fireworks ready. It
could also have something to do with the fact that I ate way too much food. I feel like I need a forklift to get me up off of the blanket and onto my feet again.

Tommy tells me to at least attempt to avoid getting my hands blown off, because he's very fond of them. Then he kisses me and lets me venture off into the descending darkness with my brothers. Everything is mostly ready to go, we're just waiting for daylight to disappear entirely before we ignite the first firework of the evening. As we stand together, and I listen to them cracking jokes and laughing boisterously beside me, I realize that tonight is the last time we'll all be together like this for a while. Ike and Zac will be in L.A. in a few weeks for work, but other than that, none of us have any set plans to see each other again for the rest of the year. I'm sure Tommy and I will bring the kids back here for Thanksgiving or Christmas, but nothing has been decided yet. I'm still not used to seeing my family so infrequently after spending thirty years of my life living just across town from them all, and it's moments like this that remind me how much I miss the closeness we used to share.

But right now it doesn't feel any different than it used to. It's just like any other Fourth of July in our family's history. I guess it's nice to know that we can set everything aside and go back to the way we were before, even if only for a few minutes.
You know that feeling you get when you have something you really want to do, and something else that you really need to do, and a bunch of other stuff that you probably should do but you don't really want to do, and you have zero time to do it in?

I think it's called panic.

I knew I wanted to take Tommy over to the studio and let him listen to what we have of the new album so far. And somewhere in the back of my mind I knew that we were going to need to find time to stop by my parent's house on the way to the airport so that we could drop off the house keys and say our goodbyes. Somehow I totally forgot to factor in time to pack up and clean the house. Probably because I hate packing, and so does Tommy, and so do the kids. Which means "packing" will probably boil down to a five minute scramble to shove everything we can into any available suitcase or bag we have, and hope that those suitcases and bags actually close (and stay closed) once we're done.

Basically, every last second of this day has been allocated, some seconds have been double booked, so everything had better go according to my hastily scribbled schedule or I may have a nervous breakdown!

"She's late." I mutter, pacing back and forth by the front door while Tommy watches me in amusement. "I told her she could come over this morning, I was trying to be a decent human being, but-

"She said she'd be here at nine." He points out nonchalantly.

"Yeah, and it's three minutes past."

"Would you chill out? Seriously, if you're gonna give yourself a fucking stroke over it, maybe we should just forget about going to the studio and-

"No!" I protest grumpily. "I want you to hear what I've been working on."
"We don't have to do it right now, though. I can just listen to it in our studio when we get home."

"But it's not the same. I-" My whining is interrupted by a knock on the door, and I practically dive on the handle to open it. "Hey, Pam."

"Hello, Taylor." She smiles politely as she steps past me into the house. "Tommy."

He nods in greeting, forcing a small smile of his own. "How's it going?"

"Fine, thank you. I'm just glad I have the chance to spend a little more time with the children before you all leave."

"Yeah, we're glad, too."	I tell her, grabbing Tommy by the arm and tugging him towards the door (which I never bothered to close). "They're all supposed to be getting their stuff together to pack later, so if you could help them finish up with that, I'd really appreciate it."

"Okay, I can-"

"Kids, Nana Pam's here! We'll be back before lunch!" I yell back into the house before pulling the door shut behind us and practically jogging over to the car.

Tommy opts for a slower pace, so I'm already in the car with the engine running and my seatbelt on before he even opens the passenger side door. I swear he's doing it on purpose to see how flustered he can make me, and the look on his face as he takes his seat only serves to reinforce that suspicion. But berating him for it will take time that I don't have; we're already five minutes late! Luckily traffic into downtown Tulsa is minimal since it's a weekend (and everyone is probably still recovering from their Fourth of July parties), so we just about make those five minutes up by the time I pull into one of the parking spaces outside of our record company offices.

I was so worried about staying on track with everything that I had planned for today, I didn't really have chance to think about how it would feel to have Tommy listen to the songs I've been working on for the last few weeks (or for the last year, all told). But now that we're actually here, I'm so nervous that I fumble with my keys when I go to open the door!

The office is quiet and empty, and every little sound we make as we walk through the halls towards the studio seems ten times louder than it actually is. Something else that's loud, to me at least, is my own heartbeat. I swear I can hear it, it's not only pounding in my chest but in my head, too. What if he hates the album? Our music has never really been his thing, but he's still always been able to appreciate it by removing his own personal tastes from the equation and focusing solely on the lyrics, musicianship and production. Which makes his opinion even more important to me, because I know he's hearing it for what it is, and not what he wants it to be.

And I know he'll be completely honest with me, too, which is both refreshing and terrifying.

"Okay, so... there're like fifteen tracks right now, but we're gonna narrow it down to twelve once they're totally finished."	I babble nervously as I click through a bunch of folders on the computer in the control room. "Most of the songs are pretty much done, they just need some tweaking before we mix them."

"I know." He tells me in a slow, condescending voice as he drops down into one of the desk chairs in front of the mixing console. "You already told me that in the car on the way here. And last night when you asked if I'd come to the studio. And last week when you-"

"Okay, point taken. I'll stop disclaimering myself now."
"Thank you."

"But keep in mind that-"

"Taylor." He cuts me off pointedly. "Would you just press play or whatever already?"

Taking one last deep breath, I place my hand over the mouse and guide the cursor on screen to begin the first track. It's a good thing I took that deep breath, because as soon as the music starts, I stop breathing. At first I don't want to look at him. I mean, I do, but I'm too anxious. And when I finally get up the nerve to glance his way, he's entirely straight-faced and unreadable. Which I should have expected, because that's how he always looks when I play him stuff for the first time. I can't tell if he does it to torment me or if he's listening so intently to the music that he forgets to have facial expressions, but it definitely doesn't make me feel any better.

I can't do this!

"I uh... I'm gonna go... do something." I mumble as I get out of my chair and make a beeline for the door.

"Where are you going?!!" He calls out to me incredulously. "This is your music I'm listening to! Don't you wanna be here to-"

"Nope."

I don't give him a chance to respond before I slip out of the control room and close the door behind me, shutting out the sound of my own voice. As soon as everything is quiet, I feel as though I can breathe easily again. But now I have to find something to occupy my mind for the next hour so that I don't spend every second of it wondering which song he's listening to and what he thinks of it. It's not something that's easy to distract myself from, though. There are a lot of musicians in the industry whose opinions I respect; my peers as well as artists who inspired me to become a songwriter to begin with.

Tommy's opinion means more to me than all of them combined.

I shouldn't be this crazy about it; I have twenty-three years of experience with performing in front of people and having to deal with receiving a negative or lukewarm reception. I have eighteen years of experience in the music industry, having everyone from music critics, to other artists, to millions of people of all ages all over the world critiquing my singing, my playing, my songwriting, my everything. It never stops. Even now, almost two decades after its release, we're still getting feedback on 'MMMBoop'! I learned a long time ago that the only opinions that really matter in the end are ours. We can't please everyone, no matter how hard we try to. So we stopped trying to. We make music we love, that we're proud of, and we put it out there and hope that other people will love it, too. But we know that not everyone will, not even our own fans. It's something we can't afford to let ourselves dwell on, because there's nothing we can do about it, and all that we'll achieve by paying too much attention to the opinions of strangers is doubting ourselves and questioning our choices.

I should be able to tell myself that it doesn't matter what Tommy thinks of it, because he isn't even into our style of music, so I can't realistically expect him to love it...

But I really want him to.

Everybody else in the entire world could hate it, we could sell zero copies, and as long as he can honestly say that he thinks it's good, I'd feel like it was a success.

In an effort to hide from my nerves, I shut myself away in my office. Except that it's not my office
anymore because I'm never here enough to use it. Now it's Ike and Zac's office, and the desk that used to be mine has become a dumping ground for stuff they don't want cluttering up their own desks. Which I guess is fair. And since neither of them are very good at keeping things clean, organizing all of the crap they've discarded gives me something to do to pass the time. Most people probably wouldn't bother making neat piles of junk mail, empty boxes and obsolete memos, but I'm not most people.

I've just finished sorting a stack of year old invoices by date when I hear someone knock on the doorframe, and my slow and steady heart rate doubles instantly.

"You're done?" I ask, trying to sound casual. The waver in my voice doesn't help.

"I'm done." I should look at him. It'd probably be weird for me to keep obsessively straightening a bunch of stuff that belongs in a recycling bin somewhere. But I'm weird, so... "Whatcha doin'?"

"Um... neatening some stuff up."

"Craft store coupons for Christmas supplies?" He questions as he picks up one of the pieces of junk mail closest to him and studies it in bewilderment. "You're straightening up junk mail? From last year?"

"Well, people just dumped it here in a big pile with a bunch of other stuff!" I argue obstinately. "There might have been something important-"

"Are you hearing yourself right now?"

Yes, unfortunately. "I needed something to do, okay? If I'd spent all this time sitting around thinking about you listening to the album and wondering what you thought of it, I would've gone crazy."

"Would've?" He teases with a smirk, leaning against the edge of the desk beside me in a way that strikes me as entirely flirtatious. "I think making neat little stacks of crap might be a sign that you actually did go crazy."

"Maybe."

"So... you wanna know what I thought of the album?"

_Seriously?_

"Am I supposed to answer that?"

His only response is to smile at me in the most enticing way imaginable as he effortlessly slides along the desk until he's perched on it directly in front of me. Then he reaches out, grabbing me by the front of my t-shirt and tugging insistently until I get out of my chair and step into the space between his parted legs.

"What're you doing?" I ask dumbly, gazing down at his hands when I feel him starting to unbutton my jeans.

"Telling you what I think of the album." He replies as he boldly pulls his t-shirt over his head and tosses it aside.

I'm so taken aback that all I can do is stand here, opening and closing my mouth like an idiot while he slowly begins to push my own t-shirt over my stomach, kissing a lazy trail up the center of my chest until he has to stop in order to remove my shirt entirely. And despite the fact that my brain is
still struggling to catch up with what's going on, I somehow muster enough sense to help him.

"We don't have time." I tell him apologetically, right before pulling him closer and kissing him hungrily. Because how can I not?

"Says who?"

"The schedule."

Laughing softly against my lips, he carelessly pushes some of my perfectly organized piles of paper off of the desk, sending them fluttering to the ground at my feet as he makes himself a little more comfortable. "You'd better fucking do some rescheduling then, 'cause there's a very lengthy and in-depth review waiting for you on your desk, and it demands your immediate attention."

Well damn.

I guess I just won't have lunch.

Who needs food anyway?

Tommy's "review" ends up being by far the most enjoyable experience I've ever had in my office. At first I assumed that he was going to show me what he thought of the album rather than tell me, but I was wrong. He did both. At the same time. And I swear it was such an insane turn on that it damn near killed me!

There were a couple of moments where I thought the desk might not survive, either. But it held up pretty well, considering...

We get back to the house right around lunch time, which I guess means I only lied to the kids a little when I told them that we'd be back before lunch. I just didn't expect that we'd be cutting it so close, because I had no idea that any of what just happened was going to happen! Not that I'm complaining. At all. Asta is the one doing all of the complaining, because Tommy didn't get her express permission before leaving. But I'm sure he'll spend the rest of the day trying to cheer her up and bribe his way back into her good graces, so I doubt she'll be pouting for too long. Even Pam seems to be in a relatively good mood, probably because she got more alone time with her grandkids than she thought she would.

I had sex and everyone wins!

"The boys were complaining that they were hungry, so I made lunch. I assume that's okay?" Pam tells me as she follows me into the kitchen.

"Yeah, definitely. Thanks for doing that."

"There wasn't very much left in the way of food." She continues somewhat disapprovingly. "But I did my best with what I could find."

"I figured we had enough food to get us through today. I didn't want to bother buying more groceries when we weren't going to be here to use them." I explain, trying hard to keep any hint of hostility out of my tone.

Sometimes I get tired of trying to be patient and understanding when she talks to me this way, but then I remind myself that it's probably her way of dealing with how hard it is to spend so much time away from the kids. She needs someone to blame, and I'm really the only person it makes sense for her to direct her resentment at.
Plus, I cheated on her daughter. So I really have no place complaining about anything she says to me.

Ever.

"Dad?"

I turn around in surprise at the sound of Ezra's voice and find him standing in the doorway looking noticeably uncomfortable. "What's up?"

"Uh..." His eyes flit from me to Pam and then back again. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

Ignoring the look of suspicion on Pam's face, and trying not to be too smug about the fact that he doesn't want to talk in front of her, I follow Ezra out into the hallway. He glances around us to make sure that no one else is nearby, which definitely piques my interest. I'm not used to him being so secretive, which gives me the distinct impression that whatever it is he's about to ask me or tell me is very important to him.

"Is everything okay?" I ask him worriedly, noting his continued vigilance of our surroundings.

"Yeah. Kind of. I..." He meets my eyes for a moment, but only for a moment, and then he looks away uneasily. "I know you're busy, and we have to get ready to go home and everything, but... I wanna visit mom."

"Oh..."

So not on the list of things I was expecting him to say.

As far as I'm aware, he hasn't visited Natalie's grave since he moved back to L.A., maybe not even since the time that Pam took them all to the cemetery on Christmas morning. It was too hard on all of them, too confusing and painful. And since I've assured them all repeatedly that they don't need to visit her grave in order to talk to her or for her to be with them, none of them have felt the need to go again. I'm not trying to dissuade them from going at all, and I'm definitely not encouraging them to forget her. I talk about her with them all the time; we bake a cake on her birthday and they make cards for her on Mother's day so that I can send them to Pam for her to take to Natalie's grave when she visits. And I've made it clear to all of them, repeatedly, that whenever we're in Tulsa all they have to do is ask if they want to visit her, and the answer will never be no.

"Okay, well... maybe your grandma can-"

"No." He stops me quickly before I can suggest that we ask Pam to take him. "I mean... can you come with me?"

"Um..." It's not like I can really say no, regardless of how much stuff I still need to get done today. This takes priority over all of it. "Of course I can. Let me just see if any of your brothers or sisters want to come-"

"Can it just be us this time?" He pleads hopefully, almost anxiously.

And again, there's no way I can look him in the eyes and refuse his heartfelt request.

I know Tommy will never forgive me if I ditch him with Pam, so I very subtly ask her to leave by telling her that I have some errands to run and then calling all of her grandkids to come and say
goodbye to her. She seems a little disappointed, but not too offended. And quite frankly I'd rather
disappoint her than Ezra or Tommy. At first when I ask Tommy to keep the kids occupied and try to
get as much of my endless 'to do' list done as he can, he's less than pleased. But when I explain to
him why I need his help, he's more than happy to hold down the fort while Ezra and I sneak out of
the house.

Even though he doesn't ask me to, I stop by a Walmart so that Ezra can pick out some flowers to take
with him. It takes him a while to decide which ones to buy, it's as though he's afraid to choose the
wrong kind. But I remind him that Natalie always loved flowers, any kind of flowers, and so
whatever he picks out for here will be just what she would want. In the end he settles on a simple
bouquet of a dozen white roses.

He's quiet for the remainder of the drive, and each time I glance over at him to see if he's okay, his
attention is entirely focused on the petals of the flowers in his lap. I'm not sure if he's inspecting them
so closely because he doesn't want to bring her anything that's less than perfect, or as a way of
dealing with his nerves. I wish there was something I could say to make him less tense, but he's so
depth in his own thoughts that I doubt he'd even hear me.

We walk silently side by side through the cemetery, weaving carefully between the rows of
headstones as we make our way towards his mom's grave. I can't remember who it was that first told
me it was disrespectful to walk across people's graves, but ever since I was a kid I've always been
careful to avoid it. Just after my grandmother passed away when I was ten, we went to visit the
cemetery on her birthday. I accidentally cut across a stranger's grave; there was a small, stone plaque
on the ground, but it was hidden by grass and I didn't see it soon enough. I felt awful. I wanted to
apologize to someone, but there was no one to apologize to, so I said sorry to the small plaque
instead. Ike teased me about it for the rest of the day.

When Natalie's headstone is within sight, I start to question how much further I should go. Does Ezra
want me to stay close, or would he rather do this part alone? I feel as though this is something
private, and that I should wait here and let him go on without me. But I don't want him to feel like
I'm abandoning him. It almost reminds me of how I felt about Tommy the last few months, wanting
to be supportive without being pushy. He needed me to stay out of it and let him figure it out for
himself.

But I don't know if that's what Ezra needs from me right now.

"Do you want me to come with you?" I ask hesitantly, slowing my pace until we come to a gradual
stop. "It's okay if you want me to wait here. But if you want me to stay with you, just say the word."

He looks towards his mom's headstone, taking a long moment to weigh his options and decide what
feels right to him. Eventually he turns to me with a faint blush on his cheeks and a guilty look on his
face. "I think I wanna go alone."

"That's totally fine." I place a hand on his shoulder and give it a comforting squeeze. "No rush,
okay? I'll be right here whenever you're ready to go."

With a barely perceptible nod he turns and begins to walk away, and all I can do is stand here and
watch him go, wishing there was something more I could do to make this easier on him. It's so
strange how he looks so different to me here than he does anywhere else. He's gaining on me in
height; at the rate he's growing I wouldn't be surprised if we're eye to eye before he starts high
school. I see him growing up so quickly in so many ways, and sometimes it's pretty scary to think
that in a few months I'll officially be the father of a teenager.

Right now he doesn't look tall to me, and he doesn't seem too grown up at all.
Rather than hanging around and staring at him the whole time, I turn my back in the hopes of offering him more of a sense of privacy. It's hard to believe it's been almost three years since I was last here. In some ways I feel horribly guilty for not bringing Natalie flowers every single time I come to Tulsa. She may not have been exactly who I thought she was, not as innocent in everything as I'd always assumed, but she was still my wife for ten years. She'll always be the mother of my children, and I'll always be grateful to her for that gift, and for raising them to be the incredible people they are.

I don't think that flowers from me, or even just a few moments of silence in front of her headstone, would mean very much to her, though. Maybe they would have before I married another man and let him adopt her kids. But if she is up there somewhere, looking down on us, I doubt she'd want the man I am now coming anywhere near her final resting place.

I'm not sure how long I was expecting Ezra to want to stay at the cemetery, I just know that he's ready to go a lot sooner than I thought he would be. Maybe he intended to spend more time here, but once he was stood at her grave he realized that he didn't feel any closer to her here than he does anywhere else. Right now that feeling might be a disappointment to him, but I hope that one day it will be comforting to know that he can feel connected to her no matter where he is. I know that's how Tommy feels about his dad. He still goes with Dia and Lisa to visit his grave on his birthday, but that's more for their benefit than his own. He remembers his dad in his own way, he misses him in his own way, and he deals with it in his own way.

Everyone does.

Just as I start the car to take us back to the house so that we can finish getting ready for our flight home, Ezra reaches out and wraps his hand around my forearm to stop me. He looks nervous again, maybe even more so than he did before we got here, and I find it impossible to tear my eyes from his face as I turn off the engine and pull the keys out of the ignition.

"What's wrong?"

"If I ask you something... do you promise you'll tell me the truth?"

Oh boy...

There are so many potential questions he might have for me right now. There's no way I can even begin to figure out what he might be about to ask me, so there's no way I can know how much damage the truth might do. But I do know that I've told enough lies in my life, and I've been trying hard to avoid telling them whenever possible, especially to Tommy and the kids. Ezra may not seem all that grown up to me right here in this moment, but deep down I know that he is. He's older than he should have to be. He's been through the worst thing that any kid could go through, and he's survived it. He's stronger than most kids his age, even though he's so soft spoken and gentle that you'd never know it.

If he wants the truth, it's the least I can give him.

"I promise."

He nods faintly, taking a moment (and a very deep breath) before looking me in the eyes again. "How did mom die?"

"You know how she died, buddy." I reply uncertainly, watching him as he shakes his head in dissent. "There were complications-"
"What complications?"

"Ez-"

"All anyone ever says is that there were 'complications' when she was having Asta, but no one will ever say what that means."

"Because you're still just a kid. It's hard to explain, and hard to understand-

"Can you let me try?" He begs me earnestly. "She was my mom, I wanna know why she died."

"I can tell you what happened, but there is no why, Ez. I know you want one. I do, too. But there just isn't."

"So then just tell me what happened. Please?"

I never wanted to have to do this, I never wanted any of them to have to know more than they already did. For some reason I thought I would be able to avoid having this conversation. I hoped that they would never question what they'd been told, as vague as it was, or that they wouldn't ever want to know more. Which was stupid of me, because of course they're going to want to know what happened to their mom. They have a right to know.

I just wish I'd spent more time thinking about how to tell them instead of hoping I'd never have to.

"While your mom was in labor, the doctor told us that something was wrong... they didn't want to wait for Asta to be born naturally, they said they needed to do something sooner." I tell him, choosing every word I say as carefully as possible. I don't want to leave him with more questions than he already has, but I don't want to completely overwhelm him, either. "They wanted to do a c-section. Do you know what that is?"

"Is it when they have to cut the baby out?" He asks apprehensively.

"Yeah. But... your mom didn't want them to do a c-section. She wanted to let Asta come on her own. I think she felt like... if she let the doctors cut Asta out instead of letting her be born naturally, it meant that she'd failed somehow."

"Why?"

I shake my head sadly, giving a helpless shrug as I take in the troubled frown on my son's face. "She just... she believed she could do it herself. She wanted to do it herself."

"If they'd let her do it like she wanted to... would Asta have died?"

"Probably." I reply gently, watching him closely as he tries to absorb all of this information and decide how to feel about it. "And when your mom realized that not letting them do the c-section would put Asta in danger, she agreed to let them do it."

"Did they do it wrong? Did they hurt her?"

"No, it wasn't anything like that." I assure him as I reach out and take his hand in mine. "No one did anything wrong, and there wasn't anything anyone could have done differently. It was... it just happened. Even when it's a really simple surgery that the doctors do all the time, and most people recover from it just fine... sometimes something happens that no one could have predicted."

"But why?" He presses, his eyes brimming with tears of frustration.
As hard as I try to stay strong, seeing him in so much pain and being unable to do anything about it hurts too much. I can't keep my voice from faltering as I answer his question. "I don't know. The doctors did everything they could, they did everything right, she just... she lost too much blood."

"Was she scared?" He cries mournfully, his eyes squeezed tightly shut in an effort to erase the images that everything he's just heard has probably conjured in his head. "Did it hurt?"

"No, it didn't hurt. They gave her something before the c-section so that she wouldn't feel anything. And when they knew something wasn't right, they probably gave her something to make her unconscious, too. I think, for her... it was just like falling asleep."

"Really?"

It's not hard for me to look him in the eyes and nod, I don't feel deceitful because I sincerely don't believe that I'm lying.

If I am lying, it's because the doctors lied to me that night when I asked them if she'd felt anything. I've been clinging to what they told me ever since. Any time my mind tried to drag me back to that night, to force me to see her lying on that operating table, machines beeping frantically, doctors scrambling to stop the bleeding... whenever I started to panic thinking about her final moments and what it must have been like for her, I'd take a breath and tell myself that she was unconscious the whole time. She had no idea what was happening to her and she didn't feel a thing.

I need to believe that.

And I need Ezra to believe it, too.

"She didn't feel it, I promise."

It's obvious that he doesn't know what to do with all of this information, he doesn't know what he's supposed to feel. He's angry, and heartbroken, and relieved all at once. And it's too much. It would be too much for anyone, but for a twelve-year-old it's hopeless. I should be able to do something, but there's nothing I can do or say to take away any of the grief he's feeling or make this any easier for him to carry. There never has been. I haven't watched him break down like this in years, not since Christmas eve right after he moved back to Tulsa with my parents. I remember how powerless I felt in that moment, too. All I could do for him was hold him and tell him that it was okay. It didn't feel like enough then, and it doesn't feel like enough now.

But the way he clings to me as he sobs into the shoulder of my t-shirt tells me that it is.
Chapter 19

This morning I was running around like a chicken with its head cut off, freaking out about how much I needed to get done and how little time I had left to do it in. This afternoon, I don’t give a crap about any of that stuff. I can’t even remember why I thought it was so important or why I was wasting so much energy on it. I guess watching your kid fall apart after begging you to tell him exactly how his mom died really puts things into perspective.

As much as I’d been dreading having that conversation with any of my kids, now that it’s over I’m glad that it happened. I know that sounds weird; what parent is glad to tell their kid something so awful? But he needed to know. He had too many questions, and not having any real answers had left him to come up with his own version of events. Now that the ‘complications’ have been uncomplicated, he doesn’t have to live with those false truths haunting him. Hopefully he can find some sort of peace in the fact that his mom didn't suffer, and that there were no mistakes made, there was nothing that could have been fixed.

There are no ‘what ifs’ left to plague him anymore, he knows that no ‘what if’ could have made a difference.

When we eventually find our way back to the house, it’s Tommy who is running around like a chicken with its head cut off. He doesn’t even hear the door open because he’s too busy calling out questions to the kids as he rushes from room to room. At first I feel terrible, because I know he's only doing it for my sake. If he didn’t think I would be a stressed out mess if none of this stuff got done, he wouldn't do it. He doesn't give a crap about being organized, he's never made a 'to do' list in his whole life!

And realizing that makes me feel the exact opposite of terrible. It's kind of impossible to feel bad when I have (very frazzled) proof of how much he loves me right there in front of me the second I walk in the door.

Ezra wordlessly makes his way down the hall, narrowly avoiding taking a duffle bag to the head as it rolls off of a precarious pile of luggage like a boulder in a rock slide. He doesn't give it more than a brief over-the-shoulder glance before continuing into the bedroom he has been sharing with his brothers.
"Asta, come on!" I hear Tommy groan in frustration from the family room. "We just cleaned those up! Put them away."

"But they're mine and I wanna play!"

"I know, but I told you we're not playing with this stuff right now. We're packing it up to take it home. Why can't you just play with some of the toys Junia let you borrow?"

When I step into the room, I find him on his hands and knees in front of the couch, scraping together the scattered Calico Critters that she apparently just tipped all over the floor. And she sits by and watches him without lifting a finger to help, because it's hard to help clean up when your arms are so firmly crossed over your chest and you're putting all your energy into maintaining a petulant scowl. All our kids have their own distinctive grouchy faces, and half the time it's hard not to laugh at them. Asta has the best one of the bunch, hands down. Her forehead gets so crinkled, and her eyebrows knit together so tightly. In my mind I picture a little storm cloud floating over her head, with lightning flashing more and more violently the madder she gets.

Don't even get me started on that pout. It's more of a pucker, really, and it makes her look like she's being forced to kiss a toad.

"Daddy!" Asta suddenly cries out in relief when she notices my presence, rushing across the room to throw herself into my waiting arms. "He won't let me play with my toys!"

"Oh, so I'm 'he' now?" Exclaims Tommy in exaggerated offense.

She snuggles against my chest as though I'm the answer to all of her problems, and after everything that just happened with Ezra it's nice to feel as though I'm still capable of protecting my kids sometimes.

Even if it is only from Tommy telling them no.

I kinda love it when I get to be the good guy in Asta's eyes. Usually I'm the one telling her no, and I don't mind doing it; it's part of parenting. But whenever I tell her she can't do something or have something, she goes running to Tommy to complain about me. It's pretty rare that he finds himself in a position where he's forced to tell her no before I do, and so it's rare that I'm the one she comes to for comfort. Which, again, is fine by me. I'm still Penny's hero, and Viggo thinks I'm cool most of the time, so it's not like I feel rejected or jealous in any way. But I'll admit, I do enjoy these few and far between moments where Asta treats me like a superhero. Even though I'm well aware that she's only doing it to pit Tommy and I against each other in hopes of getting her own way.

I kiss the top of her head softly as I hold her close. "I'm sorry, kiddo. I bet that made you really sad, huh?"

"Mmhmm."

Tommy glares at me playfully and very clearly mouths the words 'suck up'. "But we need to pack all the toys away because we're going to the airport."

"To go home." She acknowledges with a gentle nod before tilting her head back to look up at me. "Can I play with my Bridgie when I get home?"

"Not right when we get home, 'cause it'll be late and we'll all be tired. But I promise we'll see her soon, okay?"

"Okay." She sighs heavily, resting her head on my shoulder once again. "Daddy?"
"Yeah?"

"I love you."

It's hard to keep myself from laughing out loud as I watch Tommy very dramatically roll his eyes and pretend to gag, but after biting my lip for a couple of seconds I feel confident that my amusement has died down enough for me to speak. "I love you, too."

With that she begins squirming, which is my cue to put her down so that she can go and find something else to get into that we'll no doubt have to clean up later. I walk over to Tommy and offer him a hand to help him up, but he grabs the arm of the couch and gets to his feet without my assistance just to make a point.

"Traitor." He mumbles before intentionally bumping me with his shoulder when he leaves the room.

"It's not every day I get to be her favorite for five minutes!" I protest, playing along with his act as I follow him into the kitchen. "You can't blame a guy for enjoying the moment."

"You know what I was enjoying about that moment?" He asks, turning to face me with a somewhat smug smile once we're far enough away from prying ears. "How completely fucking obvious it is sometimes that's she's your kid."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"She gets it from you! The big eyes, the fake innocence... she's just like you. She even has your 'I'm so fucking cute you can't stay mad at me' smile!"

"Really? I wasn't aware I had one of those." I tease him as he shakes his head at me. "Must be why we both have you wrapped around our little fingers."

"It's disgusting." He mutters, trying his hardest to keep a straight face while I slowly snake my arms around his waist. His arms hang limply at his sides, even as I pull him up against me possessively. But no matter how little he smiles or responds to anything I say or do, I can see in his eyes that he's barely managing to maintain his stand-offish demeanor. "You're disgusting."

"And you love me, so what does that make you?"

"Batshit crazy, apparently."

"Apparently." I nod in agreement, grinning as I lean in to peck his pouting lips.

"We don't have time for this." He mocks, his hands grasping my forearms and pulling them loose from around him. "It's not on the schedule."

"Fuck the schedule."

"Okay... who are you and what the hell did you do with my disgusting dictator of a husband?"

"I am your disgusting dictator of a husband." I reply matter-of-factly, shaking off his ineffective grip on my hands and holding him close again. "I just realized that there are way more important things in life."

His mischievous expression softens in understanding as a sad half-smile curls the corner of his mouth. "You didn't happen to realize that while you were at a cemetery with your son, did you?"

"Maybe."
He doesn't ask me what happened, he simply wraps his arms around me and hugs me. He knows that I'll tell him about it if I need to, if I want to. And if I don't, it's okay. The only questions he asks me are if I'm okay and if Ezra is okay, because that's all the really matters to him in all of this. It's all that ever really matters to either of us; the wellbeing of our family is the single most important thing in our lives. We'd sacrifice anything for it, we have sacrificed for it, and there's no resentment about it. Because what we have means more to us than anything we could possibly give up.

We reluctantly return to our responsibilities at a much less hurried pace than before, doing only what absolutely needs to be done and refusing to stress about the rest. I don't know why I don't approach every aspect of my life this way. I make a mental note that sometimes reducing your stress levels is achievable by simply deciding not to be stressed.

I'm sure I'll have misplaced that note by the time we get to the airport, but at least I tried.

Once the packing is finally completed, and I've cleared out the fridge and kitchen cupboards, taken out the trash, and stripped the beds, all that's left to do is load up the car. The bags go in much easier than the kids, but that's nothing new. While Tommy works on getting Asta into her car seat, I do one last sweep of the house to make sure there's nothing glaringly obvious that we forgot to either clean up or take with us.

It's always kind of weird leaving this place, seeing it so empty. It reminds me of the day my family and I moved out. I was almost fifteen, Zoe had just been born, and everyone was more than ready to move into a bigger place. I'd been sharing a room with Ike and Zac for years, it would be the first time in our lives that we'd each have our own bedroom. Ike was probably the most excited of anyone in the family; he was seventeen, and he was sick of sharing a cramped room and bunk beds with his kid brothers, no matter how close friends we were. I wasn't entirely opposed to the idea of having some privacy, either. But at the same time, I was sad to be letting go of what we'd had.

There's no doubt in my mind that the bond the three of us shared came from the way we were raised. We travelled a lot when we were younger, which meant we mostly had only each other for company. We were homeschooled when we finally settled down in Tulsa again, so we were never separated into different grades like other siblings. We grew up in a modest sized house; three bedrooms and two bathrooms shared between two parents and six kids. The idea of leaving that all behind, of moving to a house that was basically a mansion in comparison, was undeniably scary to me. We went from using our basement garage as a makeshift practice space, to having a custom built, state-of-the-art recording studio in a detached three car garage. From having a tree house and a tatty soccer net in our backyard, to having a pool house, a pool, and over one hundred acres of land to ride our new dirt bikes on! The amount of space our success had afforded us was as terrifying as it was incredible.

I didn't want us to lose what made us who we were.

It was pretty much a non-issue, though. The same success that had made it possible for us to buy our family a new home kept us away from that home for long periods of time. Between all of the traveling, sleeping in hotels and on tour buses, and then shutting ourselves away in the studio all day every day when we weren't on the road, we lived in each other's pockets for years. In the end ,that constant closeness I'd been so afraid of losing played a big hand in driving us apart.

And then that distance somehow brought us back together again.

Life is weird like that.

As I come to a stop just inside of the open front door, I reach out to turn off the light. But something keeps me from simply flipping the switch and pulling the door closed behind me. Instead I turn
around and take a moment to truly appreciate my surroundings for the first time since we got here three weeks ago. It's been almost twenty years since I last called this house home, but for some part of me I think it will always feel like home.

"Thanks for having us." I smile fondly, leaving the house in near darkness before closing and locking the door.

By the time I get out to the car, Tommy is very obviously in one of his 'tattle trances'. He started having them within his first year of living with us, and I think they're responsible for his sanity still being (mostly) intact. It's a coping mechanism, I guess. He spaces out when the kids start bickering about unimportant stuff, because he learned pretty quickly that trying to mediate such bickering matches is completely exhausting and entirely pointless. Unless they drag him into their petty disagreements, or start taking violent action against each other, he stays out of it for as long as he possibly can.

"Ready for several hours of this on a plane?" I ask him semi-seriously, placing my hand on his thigh to snap him out of his daze. He looks over at me almost as soon as I touch him, frowning at me in confusion like he doesn't understand me at all.

Probably because he didn't. "Huh?"

"Nothing." I reassure him with a gentle squeeze of his leg. "Keep doing what you're doing."

"I wasn't doing anything."

With a knowing smile, I start the car and begin backing it out of the driveway. "Exactly. Keep doing that."

If it weren't for the fact that none of us have really said goodbye to my parents, I'd opt for skipping that stop on the way to the airport. Or at least making it so brief that I'm the only one who has to get out of the car. It's not because I don't want to see them, not at all. But I know Tommy and I are both close to wiped out already, and having to get all of the kids out of and then back into the car again is just one more thing to tire us out further. There's no way my mom is going to settle for saying goodbye to any of them while they have their seatbelts on, though, so there's no way around it.

It's not like either of us is inexperienced at running on fumes. It's kind of a job requirement to be able to keep giving even when you feel like you've got nothing left. Then you go to bed, (hopefully) get a decent night's sleep, wake up the next day recharged and refreshed... and do it all over again. And just when you start to question how the hell you're going to cope, or how much more you can take, one of them will say something, or do something, or maybe even just look at you and smile. And in that moment you know that there is no "how" about it. You just will.

Whatever it takes, however much it takes, whenever you have to.

"We're not staying long." I remind the kids as I pull over outside my parent's house and put the car in park. "Don't go starting any board games with Zoe or watching a movie with Mac, 'cause you're not gonna be able to finish them."

"How come?" Pouts Viggo.

"Because if we're late to the airport they won't let us on the plane." Tommy points out, opening the passenger side door so that he get out of the car and help Asta with the buckle on her car seat harness. She's probably going to whine and tell him that she can do it herself, but it's such a habit for him that it'll take a lot of whining on her part before he remembers not to do it for her. "I don't know
about you guys, but I'm ready to go home."

"Me too!" Concurs River enthusiastically before practically climbing over Asta and Tommy in order to get out of the car. "I'm bored of all the games I brought with me, I want all my other ones, too."

"And I miss Duke." Penny adds, exiting the vehicle much more gracefully than her little brothers. "Do you think he'll remember us? We've never left him behind for so long before."

"Of course he will." I declare with absolute certainty as I wrap my arm around her shoulders and lead her up the front path. "Dogs have really good memories. Even if we went away for a year, he'd still remember us."

She smiles gratefully, reaching up to lift my hand from her shoulder and hold it in hers. And I file that smile away safely in my memories, because it's this kind of seemingly insignificant moment that I can cling to when it feels as though I am the most hopeless parent on the planet. She probably won't remember this in a year from now, but I will. Along with all of the other evidence I have of my ability to do this 'dad' thing right. I know I'm not solving all of her problems, all I did was convince her that her dog hasn't forgotten her. And that's all she needed right now. I was able to reassure her, I was able to make her smile.

Some days that's more than enough.

Mom is already waiting for us with the door wide open before any of us have even made it onto the front porch. It's almost like she hasn't seen us in months, not like she's preparing to go months without seeing us.

Leaving Tulsa is always hard for me. Not because I miss living here, even if there are things about this city that I do sometimes miss, and not even because I hate having to say goodbye to my family. It's watching my parents say goodbye to their grandkids that kills me. I feel like such an asshole for putting them through that, regardless of the fact that I know that thousands of grandparents all over the country have to do the same thing after every family holiday and special occasion. And I know that my parents aren't resentful, they don't blame me for moving the kids to another state the way Pam does.

But knowing that doesn't make it any less painful.

Mom welcomes us all into the house warmly, offering us drinks and snacks despite me having told her on the phone earlier that we wouldn't have time. It's hard to be annoyed by it though, and it's not like I wasn't expecting it. And I guess if I'm going to be stealing her grandchildren from her for months on end, the least I can do is let her spoil them (and their dinner) before I do it.

"I tried to get the house cleaned and the dust sheets back on the furniture, but time kinda got away from me." I tell her apologetically, following her into the kitchen while Tommy and the kids make themselves comfortable in the family room with my dad and younger siblings. "I did as much as I could, though."

"You didn't have to do any of that!" She sighs, shaking her head at me in disbelief. "I told you not to worry about it, your father and I can take care of it tomorrow."

"I know, but you shouldn't have to. You weren't the ones who made the mess."

A small smirk lifts the corner of her mouth as she nudges me gently. "That never seemed to bother you or your brothers when you were growing up."

"Well, I'd like to think I've matured at least slightly since I was thirteen."
"You have." She replies somewhat condescendingly. "Slightly."

"Thanks." I grumble in feigned dejection, wrestling the house key off of the rental car keychain as an excuse to keep my eyes downcast. "I love you, too."

"What time is your flight?"

She knows what time our flight is. I've told her repeatedly over the last few days, and she has it written on a piece of note paper that's stuck on the fridge behind her. I think she's hoping that maybe it got delayed for a few hours, but unfortunately for her that's not the case.

"Five-thirty." I remind her. "So we need to be at the airport by three-thirty, because we've gotta return the rental car and get about five bags checked, not to mention grabbing sandwiches from Quiznos to take on the plane..."

We both automatically look to the clock on the wall across the room from us, watching as the second hand passes twelve and the minute hand shifts grudgingly from two-fifty-five to two-fifty-six. I can give her another fifteen minutes, but anything more than that would be really pushing it (and putting my mental health in serious jeopardy).

"Come on." I tell her, nodding towards the sound of loud chatter coming from the next room. "You're wasting time on me when you could be squeezing the life out of small, defenseless children."

"Just a second." She stops me, surprising me by taking me by the wrist and holding me back from leaving the kitchen. "There's something I've been wanting to talk to you about, but... there hasn't really been a good time."

Okay... "What's going on? Are you alright?"

"I'm fine-"

"Is dad-"

"He's fine." She assures me before I can start freaking myself out with all of the potentially serious things she might be about to discuss with me. "Everyone's fine."

"Good."

"At least... I hope they are."

I frown in confusion, trying to figure out how I'm supposed to react to that statement. "What do you mean?"

"I don't want you to be upset with me, or think that I'm questioning your relationship with Tommy-"

"Wait... what? Why would I think that?" Unless that's exactly what she's about to do. "We're fine."

"Really?"

"Mom-"

"I know you think I'm prying, or being over-dramatic, or whatever else it is that you and your brothers all seem to think I am whenever I show even the slightest hint of concern, but I'm not."

I didn't think she was being over-dramatic until about two seconds ago when she started being over-
dramatic! "There's nothing for you to be concerned about. I don't even know where you'd get the idea that there might be."

"I'm sorry, but some of the things Tommy said the day he got to Tulsa raised some red flags for me." She explains, pleading with me to take her seriously and not just dismiss everything she's trying to say to me.

It's ridiculously hard not to tell her that she's imagining things and walk out, but I know that if I do, she's going to be worrying about this, whatever she thinks it is, for the rest of the year. So I take a deep breath and try to stay calm. "Like what?"

"That going on tour 'helped'. I know you said it helped with him being restless, but I got the feeling there was more to it than that. And him going on tour out of the blue in the first place was-"

"The guy he was filling in for got hurt right before his band was supposed to hit the road." I tell her plainly, trying to take comfort in the fact that it's not a lie. Not really. "If he'd known sooner that he was going to be offered a job, it wouldn't have been out of the blue."

She studies my face silently, and I do my best to hold her stare and not so much as blink until she's satisfied that I'm telling her the whole story. "I'm not trying to cause trouble where there isn't any, but it all felt... off to me. And I can't help worrying about you and the kids-"

"There's nothing to worry about."

"I don't want him to get more and more 'restless', and wind up leaving you high and dry with five children." She sighs worriedly.

"He's not going to leave me high and dry! He's not going anywhere."

"Are you sure?"

Ugh. She's not gonna let this drop unless I give her something to assuage her fears. And I guess the whole truth is probably my best bet. "Look... you're right that there was more to it than him being restless. But it's not what you think it is. There's nothing going on between us, we're not having problems, I promise. He's just been in a bit of a rut since he stopped working with Adam, and he needed some time to figure out what he really wants."

"And what is that?" She asks with obvious concern. "To start touring with other bands?"

"No, actually, it's the exact opposite. Going on tour last month made him realize that it's not what he wants right now. Because he doesn't want to be away from home all the time."

Her eyes narrow in suspicion, and I can't help but roll mine in response. "Are you just telling me that because you think it'll make me feel better?"

"No. I hope it made you feel better, though, because otherwise you're going to be worrying over something that isn't even happening. At least, not outside of your twisted imagination." I see the smack coming before she even attempts it, so I'm able to step out of reach and avoid it completely. "Are you done accusing Tommy of wanting to abandon me and the kids?"

"I wasn't-"

"You were."

"I was just worried about you." She maintains. "All of you."
I shake my head at her before taking her by the arm and pulling her into a tight hug, which she doesn't hesitate to return. "Now you can stop."

"Never."

Despite telling everyone that we couldn't spend long at my parent's house, I end up going against my own insistence that we leave at the exact time I'd told myself we needed to leave by. I know it's going to result in a lot of rushing around the airport, and worrying that we're going to miss our flight or have no time to get dinner before we board. But I just can't bring myself to tell my kids and my parents that it's time to say goodbye until I absolutely have to. I may have had it all planned out in my head, down to the last minute, but for the third time today my carefully thought out plans come in a far second to making sure that the people I love get what they need from me.

Thankfully, I have an awesome husband who is really good at being calm and rational whenever I start being the polar opposite of those things. So when we get to the airport and I start losing my shit trying to keep the kids from whining about waiting in line, or getting underfoot at security, or over-complicating their sandwich orders at Quiznos, or emptying out their backpack at the gate just to look for a specific book or toy, he remains almost entirely unaffected and level-headed. You'd think it'd be the other way around, given the fact that I have twenty years of experience with hectic schedules, busy airports, and traveling with children. But being a total control freak always seems to get the best of me. He's spent enough time with me to know this, and he's always prepared for it.

Somehow I never am.

But that's part of what makes us so good for each other. It's rare that we're both losing our minds to equal degrees at the exact same time. One of us is always more stable than the other, so neither of us ever has to worry about everything falling apart. And it's never the same person holding it all together, we both have our moments, which is why we make the perfect team.

Somehow we make it onto the flight without major incident, and without the gate staff having to announce over the PA system that the plane is about to leave without us. That's not the end of the drama, though, because seat assignments still haven't been decided. Really, we should just randomly hand a boarding pass to each of them and force them to sit in whatever seat number is on it. But since there are three seats on either side of the aisle, and seven of us, someone has to take the single seat in the row in front, and it's not like that someone can be Asta. Tommy is about to volunteer to take it when Ezra slips past him and takes the seat instead. Which is kind of perfect, because then Tommy and I can each sit in the aisle seats to keep the other four from getting up during the flight and being run over by the beverage cart (it's happened more than once).

Just after takeoff, when all of the kids are happily preoccupied with music, books, or the in-flight entertainment, I unbuckle my seatbelt and lean forwards to tap Ezra on the shoulder. He takes his earbuds out and turns in his seat to look at me, and I smile hopefully as I ask him if he's okay. I watch him intently, trying to read his expression as he opens his mouth to reply. Something seems to catch his eye, distracting him enough that for a moment he forgets to answer to my question. And when I follow his gaze to find out what it is he's looking at, I see Asta sitting on Tommy's lap. His seatbelt is fastened around both of them, and he's listening to his iPod while she watches 'Dora The Explorer' on my iPad.

"Ez?"

His eyes shift suddenly from Tommy and Asta to me, and much to my relief there's a genuine smile on his face. "I'm fine."
I love my bed.

I love it just as much today as I did the day we bought it. It's the best bed in the world. I compare all other beds to this bed. Whenever I have to spend the night in a hotel, or we stay at my family's old house in Tulsa the way we just did, I miss this bed.

But right now what I really miss is only having to share it with one other person.

Even though we told Asta before we even left Tulsa that she was going back to sleeping in her own bed once we got home, and even though we put her to sleep in that bed last night after our exhausting trip back to L.A., I still woke up this morning to find her occupying the space between me and Tommy. I don't know if he let her come in, or if she just snuck in by herself in the middle of the night when we were both too dead to notice her presence. Tommy was in complete agreement with me about her needing to go back to her own bed so that this habit she picked up in Tulsa doesn't continue indefinitely. But I wouldn't be shocked if he brought her in here because she was crying at some point during the night.

I guess it doesn't really matter how it happened, what matters is figuring out how to make it stop.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not completely heartless. I have never stopped any of my kids from getting into bed with me when they've woken up in the middle of the night because of a nightmare, or a storm, or because they're sick. Those are infrequent and usually isolated events, though. I know Asta was scared of Tommy leaving her again, and maybe she still is, but this is getting out of hand. Hopefully now that we're at home things will feel more consistent for all of us, and she'll quickly figure out that there's nothing to be afraid of anymore.

I need her to figure that out, because I miss having sleepy morning sex with my impossibly beautiful husband!

Carefully reaching across our slumbering daughter, I tap my pointer finger against Tommy's forehead, over and over again, until eventually his brow crinkles in irritation and he blindly swats my...
hand away like a fly.

"Wake up, traitor."

He grudgingly cracks one eye open just long enough to let me know he's awake, then he groans pathetically to let me know he's not happy about being awake. "It's Sunday, you sadist."

"Don't try to change the subject."

"It's too early for subjects."

Why does he have to be so damn adorable? "There's a girl in our bed."

"Oh... yeah."

"How many times do I have to tell you to stop inviting girls into bed with us?"

"But she's so cute!" He yawns, draping his arm over Asta's body and scooping her right up against his chest. She grumbles a little in her sleep, but aside from clutching at his wrist with her tiny fingers, she doesn't stir. "Can I keep her? Please?"

"You can keep her, but she has to sleep in her own bed." I warn him playfully, earning myself the most pitiful pout in response. "Either she goes or I go."

"Okay."

"Okay... what?"

He breathes a contented, undisturbed sigh as he snuggles down deeper under the comforter and nuzzles into his pillow. "Okay, you can go."

I kinda want to shove him out of bed right now, but there's a good chance our three-year-old will end up as collateral damage, so I resist the urge. When I fail to respond in any way to his dismissive insinuation that he'd prefer to snuggle with Asta than with me, he curiously opens his eyes again to try to gauge how offended I am by the look on my face.

And when he sees me scowling at him, he grins so smugly that it's impossible for me to remain in bed with him any longer when I can't do anything in retaliation! If Asta wasn't in here, I would've had him pinned to the mattress several sassy remarks ago. But she's basically being used as a human shield, so I'm completely powerless. I mutter something about not staying where I'm not wanted as I throw the comforter off and roll out of bed, and he doesn't do a thing to stop me. So when I pass him on my way to the bathroom, I make sure to pull back the sheets on his side of the bed, exposing his back to me and smacking him on the butt.

He squeaks, his body jerking so suddenly that it automatically wakes Asta up. "Rise and shine!"

"I don't wanna."

"Too bad. Your mom is expecting us for brunch, and no one's gonna have an appetite if you smell like that."

"I smell better than you do." He retorts childishly.

"Your mouth is stinky." Asta informs him, lifting his arm away from her body just enough so that she can crawl out from under it. "You gotta brush your teeth!"
I have to fight like hell to keep a straight face when he rolls over to look at me, his mouth hanging open in indignation. "Are you hearing this?"

"Sorry, dude." I shrug helplessly. "Your morning breath never bothered me, but... I'm not the one you wanted to share a bed with, so..."

"I changed my mind." He pouts. "I like you more now."

With a nod of acknowledgement, I smile and continue on my way to take a shower. "Good to know."

"Come back to bed!"

"Not a chance."

Going to brunch at Dia's this morning seemed like an inspired idea when I accepted the invitation last month. I figured it would kill two birds with one stone: spending time with Tommy's family after being out of town for so long, and feeding my kids without having to go to the grocery store before I'd fully recovered from the journey home. I forgot to factor in how much the kids had missed our house, their bedrooms, their toys, their pool, their movies...

Trying to get them excited about leaving all of those things when they only just got them back a few hours ago is nearly impossible. It doesn't matter that they'll be back here again before dinner, or that Dia has their dog and they've missed him like crazy, too. The only one who is genuinely happy to be going to brunch is Asta, and that's mostly because she'll get to see her best friend. It's not that the kids don't like spending time with Dia, they enjoy being around her almost as much as they enjoy being around my parents and Pam.

But even my parents and Pam come in second to video games and TV sometimes.

Somehow we manage to get over to Burbank on time, we even beat Lisa to the house, which is completely unheard of! It makes Tommy almost giddy, despite the fact that he was dragging his feet this morning just as much as the kids. Apparently getting here first makes him "the good one" (possibly for the first time ever).

"I know you guys would rather be at home right now, but Dia has missed you way more than you've missed your toys, okay?" I inform the kids as we head up the driveway. "I don't wanna hear any whining."

"Okay." Mumbles River.

"And the first one of you to ask me if we can go home yet, isn't coming home with us at all."

Viggo's eyes grow dramatically wider at the implication of being left behind. "Not ever?"

"Not today. I'm sure Dia would love to have you sleep over."

"I doubt it." Snorts Tommy.

Apparently Dia's "Mom Radar" isn't as advanced as my mom's, because if it was my parents we were having brunch with, my mom would have had the front door open before we even reached it. We have to knock several times before Dia answers the door, and when she does she looks entirely caught off guard and unprepared for our presence. And I don't mean "I haven't finished cooking" unprepared, I mean "I'm still in my bathrobe" unprepared.
"You told me she said ten!" I smack Tommy lightly in the arm.

"She did!" He exclaims defensively before turning to his mom. "You did!"

She frowns at us for a moment or two longer before it seems to dawn on her why there are five hungry kids and two under-caffeinated men standing on her doorstep. "Oh my gosh... I completely forgot!"

"You mean there's no food in there?" Asks Tommy warily. "'Cause we promised them waffles, and if there are no waffles then they might eat your damn couch."

"Can we see Duke, please?" Penny interrupts politely. "We missed him so much."

"Of course you can, honey." Dia forces a small smile in an attempt to appear less flustered than she clearly is. "He's out in the back yard, go on through."

"Are you sure you want us to come in?" I question worriedly even as I follow Tommy and my kids past Dia and into the house. "We can just pick Duke up and get out of your hair."

"Oh, no, please stay!" She insists, grabbing Tommy and pulling him into a tight hug before he can get out of her reach. "I feel like I haven't seen any of you in months."

"You saw me less than a month ago." He reminds her, rolling his eyes at me over her shoulder. "Seriously, why are mothers so over-dramatic? Is it like some kind of hormone imbalance that happens after childbirth or something?"

"I suppose I should be grateful that you're this much of a brat, otherwise I'd probably miss you a lot more." She teases with a playful scowl as she lets him go.

Just as she's about to close the front door behind us, Lisa's car pulls into the driveway. I notice Dia's smile falter for a second when she looks down at her robe fretfully, tightening the knot in the cord at her waist. I feel so bad for her; I know how annoyed I'd be at myself if I invited ten people over for brunch and then totally forgot they were coming. Especially if over half of those people were under the age of thirteen and not exactly patient about being fed as soon as their stomachs start to grumble.

"Hey, Dia, why don't I make a start on brunch while you-"

"I can't let you do that!" She objects guiltily. "You're my guest."

"Let him cook. He likes it."

"Well..."

"Mom, come on." Sighs Tommy in exasperation. "You're in your fucking bathrobe-"

"Language!"

"At least let us make some coffee or something while you put your clothes on?"

It's obvious that she knows she's not going to win this fight. She's outnumbered, and for once Tommy and I have common sense on our side. But it's also obvious that she doesn't want to just give in, no matter how futile it is for her to decline our offer to help. She wants to believe that she has this under control, and that she can get dressed and make brunch for almost a dozen people without killing herself in the process. Deep down she knows she can't, and that she needs our help whether she wants it or not. And again I feel awful for her, because it's never fun admitting defeat.
"Fine." She grudgingly relents. "You can start while I get dressed. But I'm more than capable of handling it myself."

"No one said you weren't." Tommy assures her somewhat condescendingly as he puts and arm around her and all but drags her down the hall towards her bedroom. "Don't forget to brush your hair."

"You are my least favorite son."

"I'm also your most favorite son." He smiles proudly, opening the door for her and giving her a gentle push towards it. "You know ya love me."

"But I don't know why."

"Don't hurt yourself trying to figure it out."

I've barely made it into the kitchen and started filling the coffee pot with water (I have priorities) when Lisa, David and Bridget come into the room. Usually it's not that big of a deal when we see each other, we rarely go more than a couple of weeks at a time without having some kind of get-together. But between Tommy going on tour, and all of us going to Tulsa, and everything that was going on for us in the weeks leading up to those things, it's been well over a month since we've all been in the same place at the same time. At first all of the hugging and "how have you been" chatter distracts them from the fact that there's no food (except Bridget, she left in search of Asta as soon as saw me and realized that she was probably here, too).

"Why don't I smell waffles?" Lisa asks suddenly, cutting short the conversation Tommy and David were having about his time on the road. "And where's mom?"

"Mom forgot she invited us all over and promised to feed us."

"She's getting dressed." I explain, nudging Tommy playfully with my hip. "And I was just about to start making waffle batter."

"I'll help." She cheerfully volunteers, already opening the refrigerator to grab some butter, eggs, and milk.

Tommy and David stand aside for a minute and watch us work, not wanting to seem unhelpful by leaving but also having no interest at all in doing anything even vaguely resembling cooking. I can tell that Tommy is waiting for me to either delegate a task to him or dismiss him, but I still feel like he owes me for this morning, so I do neither. Lisa is feeling much more merciful than I am, though. I guess David didn't all but kick her out of bed.

"Why don't you two make yourselves useful and keep an eye on the kids?"

"Good idea." Agrees her husband dutifully, sharing a relieved glance with Tommy as the two of them quickly make their way towards the back door before either of us can think of something else we'd rather have them do.

I watch Tommy join our kids (and our dog) in the back yard. He's immediately pulled into the chaos, and Duke starts jumping all over him with unrestrained excitement over their reunion. I should be used to this kind of thing by now; it's my every day. But it's been my every day for almost three years, and sometimes I still find myself frozen in place, incapable of doing anything except staring at him as he plays with our kids or rough houses with our dog. It used to be because I couldn't quite believe he was real, his presence in my life was astounding to me. I know he's real now, though, we've been together long enough for me to be convinced. But I'm still astounded by the fact that I'm
this lucky. It's not just that he's my husband, although that reality still baffles me completely. It's that this didn't just happen. Our paths didn't simply cross and gradually merge into one with no detours or road blocks. It wasn't as easy as him choosing me, or vice versa, and us living happily ever after.

I know how many stars had to align for any of this to be possible, and I know that it will continue to stop me in my tracks and take my breath away from time to time for the rest of my life.

"You must have missed him a lot while he was on tour." Lisa observes, pulling my gaze away from the kitchen window and leaving me blushing faintly when I see her amused smile.

I shrug nonchalantly, trying to keep myself from smiling back at her as I pretend to be indifferent. "A little, I guess. I was pretty busy, so I kinda didn't notice he was gone most of the time."

"Uh huh." She shakes her head at me for a moment before rolling her eyes. "You've been married to my brother for too long."

Not long enough, in my opinion.

When Dia is finished getting dressed, she joins us in the kitchen. Well, I say "joins", but it was really more like she walked into the room and told us both to go outside with our kids and let her finish cooking. But I'm not someone who gives up on something once I've started it, and stubbornness runs in the Ratliff family, so she can't get rid of either of us that easily. Or at all. With all three of us in the kitchen, the working conditions are cramped to say the least, and even though it takes us a while to stop getting in each other's way, we eventually figure out a system that makes preparing brunch ten times faster than it would have been if any one of us had tried to do it solo. Which is good, because just as we're finishing up and about to call everyone inside to eat, River comes in from the back yard looking for food.

Having family gatherings at Dia's or Lisa's house always makes me feel guilty, because it's a challenge finding enough room to seat everyone comfortably, and even more of an ordeal making enough food to feed everyone. Especially with my three growing boys who have garbage disposals where their stomachs should be. Tommy and I have way more space and a much bigger kitchen, but trying to convince his mom and sister to let us host every meal is impossible. They won't even let us contribute by bringing a salad or dessert!

At least our kids are generally on their best behavior whenever we come to Dia's, so aside from Asta and Bridget putting raspberries on their fingertips and then eating them off one at a time, their table manners are... passable. Any time we can get through a meal without any of them raising their voice, or spilling their drink, or dropping their food all down their front, or crying, I call it a win. I'm sure some people would say my expectations are too low, and to those people I say take all five of my kids out for a meal at the same time, then come and talk to me about how high my expectations for their table manners should be.

After everyone has stuffed themselves, the kids decide to go back outside and run it off while us adults opt for collapsing in lawn chairs and hoping our stomachs don't explode. I know that I had the same amount of energy as them, once upon a time, but right now I'm having a hard time remembering how it felt.

There's no way around it, I'm getting old.

"I can't even look at them." David groans in discomfort as he sinks down further in his chair, trying to find a way to get as close to being horizontal as possible without ending up on the ground. "They're abnormal."
"There are so many of them." Sighs Lisa. "And they move so fast!"

"They're like gremlins." Tommy remarks with a hint of fear in his tone. "Maybe one of you should go put the hose away so they don't get wet."

Dia chuckles softly as takes in the sight of us all sleepily slumped in our seats. "You're all pathetic."

"Thanks, mom." He grumbles sarcastically.

Seemingly out of nowhere, Asta practically takes a running jump onto Tommy's lap. I can't tell if it was his stomach she landed on or something else, but either way he nearly doubles over as he tries to bite back sounds of pain. Asta is, of course, completely oblivious to what she's done.

"You can't get me!" She yells at her younger brother as he runs across the yard in pursuit.

"That's cheating!" Viggo declares in outrage, coming to a stop on the patio right in front of Tommy's chair. "You have to stay on the floor!"

Her only response is to stick her tongue out at him while he whines at the rest of us to "make her get down".

"I know I say this almost every time we see you, but... I don't know how you guys do it." David tells us in genuine amazement. "Five kids... I can't even imagine."

"Don't even imagine." Lisa demands playfully. "We have one, and we're done."

"How come you're not gonna have more babies?" Asks Viggo, frowning curiously at Lisa. "Don't you like babies?"

"We love babies, sweetie, we're just..." She pauses for a moment, glancing at David for assistance in explaining their fertility issues to a child.

"We're too old to have any more." David concludes for her.

Viggo looks even more concerned by this information than he did by the idea of them not liking babies. "How old are you?"

"You can't ask people that, buddy." I tell him quickly. "It's rude."

"Why?"

"'Cause people who are as old as Lisa don't want anyone knowing their age." Explains Tommy with a devious smirk.

"Shut up, jerk face!"

"So when people get old they can't have babies anymore?" Viggo continues to pry.

Lisa smiles at him fondly as she shakes her head. "Some people can, but we can't."

"Maybe someone else can have a baby for you?" He suggests innocently. "My daddy and Tommy were gonna ask a woman to look after their baby until it was born."

For a moment Lisa, David and Dia all seem completely baffled by what he's said, as though it's some strange kind of kid logic that he made up off of the top of his head. But when Lisa realizes what it is he's trying to say, her eyes grow wider than I think I've ever seen them before. And as soon as she
figures it out, David and Dia seem to catch on, too.

"Oh my God!" She practically squeals, scooting to the edge of her seat and staring at us in shock. "You're having a baby!"

"No, we-"

"I can't believe it!" Exclaims Dia emotionally, her had flying to her mouth as her eyes begin to shine with tears. "Why didn't you say anything?"

Oh, this is so bad.

"I'm gonna have a new baby to play with?" Asta looks up at Tommy inquisitively. "A real baby?"

"We're not having a baby." Tommy tries to clarify and calm every one down before all of the excitement catches the attention of the rest of our kids. But it's too late, they heard Lisa's shriek and now they're all coming over to find out what happened to cause the commotion. "We thought about it, but it just... wasn't a good time."

Dia's smile fades so fast that there's no way I can not feel guilty. "Why isn't it a good time?"

"A good time for what?" Penny asks, looking back and forth between the two of us expectantly just like Tommy's family has been doing for what feels like forever.

I don't know how to answer their questions, and neither does he.

Saying that Ezra didn't want another baby in the family is like blaming him for our decision, blaming him for the disappointment on Dia's face, and I can't do that with him standing here. I wouldn't do it even if he wasn't here! But... he is the reason this isn't a good time. The only reason, really. If he hadn't been so against the idea, there's a good chance we'd have a surrogate by now, we could have even been days away from our first IVF attempt for all I know.

"We just... we want to focus on the kids right now." I tell them, being very careful to make it sound like this was entirely our choice.

"Right." Agrees Tommy, offering his mom an apologetic smile. "It's not a bad thing, okay? Nothing's any different now than it was five minutes ago."

"I know, you're right, it's just..." She sighs deeply, staring off across the yard at something that isn't even there. Her lips begin to curl into a small smile, but only faintly, and I have a feeling that she's thinking about what could have been, not what is. "A baby would have been... I would have loved it, that's all."

"I know." He nods as he reaches out to her and takes her hand in his.

He doesn't need to say how much he would have loved it, too. It's written all over his face.

The "we're having a baby... only not" bombshell pretty much put a dampener on the rest of the afternoon, and as soon as Asta started to get even slightly cranky I used that as an excuse for us to head home. It was as much for Dia's sake as for ours; it was obvious that she wanted to be alone but didn't want to ask us all to leave.

Tommy was quiet on the drive home, and even the kids seemed more subdued than usual. I think they could tell that something was bothering him (it's rare that our moods have no effect on them), and none of them wanted to do anything to upset him. I definitely didn't want to bring him down any
further, either. So as soon as we got home I sent him off to do something to cheer himself up, whether that was watching a movie, playing video games, messing around in the studio, or taking Duke for a walk. I asked the kids not to bother him, and to come and find me if they needed anything, and after putting Asta down for a nap I set to work unpacking our bags and doing a mountain of Tulsa laundry in an attempt to keep myself busy.

This past week it felt as though we were starting to move on from all of this. I knew he wasn't over it, he still wanted it. We both did. But it really seemed as though we'd both made peace with the idea of not having another baby, and we'd made some kind of unspoken agreement to focus on the family we already have, to appreciate how lucky we are and to let it be enough. And now... I'm pretty sure that recently healed wound has just been ripped open for him. He's feeling it all over again, and just like before, I know there's nothing I can do to make it less upsetting for him. He just needs space.

"Dad?"

I look up from the pile of clothes I was folding, surprised to find Ezra lingering in the doorway of the laundry room. "What's up? I thought you guys were watching TV."

"We were. Everyone else still is..."

"You okay?" I ask in concern, setting down the t-shirt in my hands and giving him my full attention.

"When Tommy went away on tour..." He lowers his eyes to the ground at his feet, nudging the grout between the tiles on the floor with the toe of his shoe. "Did he go because he was mad?"

"Mad? About what?"

"About me not wanting you to have a baby."

"He wasn't mad." I assure him honestly.

"Well... was he sad, like Dia was today?" He presses, and even though I open my mouth to tell him that Tommy didn't leave because he was sad, I can't bring myself to say it. I don't want to lie.

"He was sad, but it wasn't just about the baby. It was about losing his job, and not knowing what to do next. But going on tour helped him figure that stuff out, and he feels a lot better now."

I can see him taking in what I've said and deciding whether or not he believes that everything is as okay as I'm trying to make it sound. It's hard for me to just stand here and let him figure things out for himself, but I know that's all I can do. All I should do. If I keep talking and trying to convince him, he's not going to have a chance to get there by himself.

"Why does he want to have a baby so bad?" He questions eventually. "Really."

"We..."

"And don't make it about Viggo and cupcakes like last time."

I can't help but laugh softly as I run a hand through my hair and try not to dwell on that horrendous analogy. It was not my finest moment. "It's not because we're not happy, or because you guys aren't enough-"

"I know." He cuts me off quickly. "You already said that before, but you didn't tell me how we're enough even when you still want another baby. I don't get it."
"You know... being a dad doesn't start when the baby is born. It starts way before that. The first time I went with your mom to see her doctor when she was pregnant with you, you weren't even big enough for anyone to be able to tell she was pregnant. But you had a heartbeat, and the second I heard it... that was when it became real for me. That was when I knew you were real and I was a father. And then watching you grow, and seeing you come into the world... it was amazing. I'd never loved anyone or anything as much as I loved you, I'd never felt the way I felt the first time I held you or heard you cry. I don't think anyone can know what it's like until it happens to them."

At first he seems lost, as though nothing I've said has made anything any clearer for him, it's only confused him further. But I can see him working through it all, until he finally looks me in the eyes. And as soon as he does, I'm sure that he understands what I was trying to say.

"You know what it feels like, but Tommy doesn't."

"Yeah."

"And he never will unless he has a baby, too?"

"It's not because he doesn't love you guys, or because he doesn't feel like he's your dad. He does, it's just..."

"Not the same." He concedes sadly.

"It's okay, Ezra." I place a hand on his shoulder and give it a comforting squeeze before gently pulling him closer, and he doesn't resist as I wrap my arms around him. "We'll be okay, no matter what."

"How do you know? Sometimes things aren't okay, and you can't make them okay no matter what you do."

"I just meant that Tommy and I will be okay if we don't have a baby."

"I know, but if you did..." He pulls out of our hug slowly, and I can see on his face how troubled he is and how important this is to him. "You don't know it'll be okay."

"No. But... no one ever knows that about anything. We can't know. The only way we can avoid ever having anything bad happen to us is to lock ourselves in an empty room and never leave. But even that's not a guarantee. I mean, you could choke on your food. And if you're locked in an empty room alone, there's no one to help you!" He rolls his eyes at me, but I can see him starting to smile and it only spurs me on. "Or the room could get struck by lightning and catch on fire, or destroyed by a tornado, or swallowed up in an earthquake, or-"

"Okay, I get it!" He laughs, giving me a half-hearted shove to push me away. "You can stop now."

"My point is, there's no way to avoid things going wrong, no matter how hard you try or how much planning you do. It sucks, but it's just a fact. And trust me, I spent most of my life trying to make everything okay when it wasn't, but nothing I did really made any difference. Everything I'd spent years trying to keep from happening eventually happened anyway, and then some."

"I know."

"Sometimes horrible things happen, and it hurts, and we feel like we'll never get over it. But even if things can never be the way they were before, we do get over it. We keep going, and we keep trying, and good things happen to us. They might never make up for the bad things, but they still make life worth living."
He nods slowly, contemplatively, and then without another word he turns and walks back out of the room, leaving me to dazedly return to the chore I was preoccupied with when he came in. But just as I pick up the half-folded t-shirt on the top of the pile, he reappears in the doorway.

"Dad?" I look up at him, still too mystified to respond verbally. "I hope it's a boy. I really don't need another sister."
It took a few minutes for what Ezra had said to me to truly sink in, for the meaning of his words to fully register. He didn't wait around for a response, he was gone again as soon as he was done speaking. And I just stood there like an idiot, staring at the t-shirt I was holding, trying to wrap my mind around what had just happened. My heart was on some runaway rollercoaster ride, climbing to dizzying heights and then suddenly plummeting to nauseating lows. One minute I was convinced that he had just given me his blessing to have another baby, and my hopes soared. But the next I was second guessing that conclusion, assuming that he must have meant something else, and my hopes crashed.

Eventually I made my way out of the laundry room and back up to the family room where all the kids were watching TV. There was still no sign of Tommy, I honestly wasn't even sure if he was still in the house. I was sure that wherever he was, he would come and find me when he was ready. And unless there was some kind of emergency, or I had something really important to tell him, it was best if I left him alone. But I wouldn't know if I had something really important to share with him until I'd pulled my son aside and made sure that we were both on the same page.

I'd never forgive myself if I went running to Tommy and told him that Ezra was on board and we could get back to our surrogate search, only to find out that Ezra hadn't actually approved of our plans at all.

The fact that Ezra seemed intent on avoiding looking me in the eyes as he obediently left the family room with me made me more than a little nervous. It was obvious he felt uncomfortable, but I couldn't tell why. I was scared that even if he had been giving me the go ahead back in the laundry room, if I screwed up somehow, he might change his mind and take it back. And since I'm the King of screwing up, I was understandably on edge. Which made it even more of a challenge for me to know how best to approach the subject. I seriously felt like I was trying to defuse a bomb; red wire or blue?

Choose the wrong one and it's all over.
Luckily, the bomb defused itself, so I never had the chance to blow everything up. Before I could even open my mouth to speak, he boldly looked me in the eyes and said, "I meant it." I was careful to ask him what he meant, because I didn't want to leave any room for uncertainty. He told me that if Tommy and I wanted to have a baby, if it would make us happy, we should do it. But he also stressed that he was still afraid that something would go wrong, and that things wouldn't be the same anymore. I knew it was pointless trying to tell him that everything would be okay. There was no way he could believe it, even if he wanted to. What had happened with Natalie had changed his entire life, torn his world apart. And though rationally he knew that there was no way that could happen again, reason wasn't enough to chase his fears away. The only promise I could make him that I knew I could keep was that, even if something went wrong somewhere along the way, we would still be okay. I was sure of that.

If we could survive everything we had already survived, I couldn't imagine anything the universe could throw at us that we wouldn't be able to overcome.

As soon as our conversation was over, all I could think about was finding Tommy and telling him what had happened. I didn't want him to have to spend another minute feeling sad about something that wasn't even an issue anymore. He isn't always an easy guy to find, though. Especially when he doesn't want to be found. I checked the studio first, then the movie room, and I even opened the front door to check that his car was still in the driveway before heading upstairs to our bedroom...

Only to find the door locked.

"Tommy?" I tap my knuckles against the door lightly and then listen closely for any sounds of movement on the other side. "Are you awake?"

"I'll be out in a minute." He replies grudgingly, clearly not ready to put in an appearance anytime soon.

"Can you let me in?"

"I just said I'll-"

"I need to talk to you about something. Now." I tell him hopefully. "It's important."

"How important?"

My forehead falls against the door with a dull thud as I sigh in frustration. He's so fucking stubborn sometimes, frequently to his own detriment. "I don't wanna talk about this through a door."

He doesn't respond, and for a moment or two I hear absolutely nothing that would suggest he's even so much as sat up on the bed, let alone made a move to let me in. But just as I raise my hand to bang on the door some more in an attempt to irritate him so much that he might open it just to smack me around the head, I hear his sock covered feet padding across the hardwood floor. I instinctively take a step back at the sound of the lock turning, and I barely have a chance to see the look on his face once the door opens because he has already turned his back to me and is retreating to the safety of our bed.

The room is dark; the TV is off and the shades are all drawn. I want to assume he was sleeping, but I know better. He doesn't shut himself away in here like this very often, and I don't remember a time when he has ever locked the door unless I was in here with him. But on the few occasions that he has withdrawn to our bedroom in a bad mood, he has blocked out every shred of light he possibly can.
"You're getting good at the whole vampire thing." I tease him as I close the door behind me and slowly approach the bed. "Maybe I should start checking for fangs before I get too close?" Nothing. Not even a hint of a smile. "Listen... I know what happened at your mom's probably brought up a bunch of stuff-"

"I'm fine." He lies apathetically. "It's whatever."

I can't help but roll my eyes as I carefully crawl onto the mattress and lie down beside him. "It's not 'whatever'."

"Yeah, well... I need it to be."

"No, you don't."

"Taylor-"

"I just talked to Ezra." I interrupt him quickly, before he can launch into whatever protest he had lined up. "He came to talk to me, actually."

"About what?" He asks with a curious frown as he turns his head to look me in the eyes.

"He wanted to know why we wanted to have a baby, so I explained it to him. Again. I must have done a better job than I did the first time, because he basically told me we should do it."

Tommy's eyes search mine, looking for some sign that I'm making this up or lying to him, and I hold his wary stare until I can see that he's starting to believe me. "Wh... what did he say? I mean, maybe he didn't mean what you thought he-"

"He meant it." I assure him with a soft smile as I reach out to him, draping my arm across his waist and coaxing his body a little closer to mine. "Trust me, I checked."

"I don't understand..."

"You know how you were willing to put aside what you wanted because you love him too much to do anything that would hurt him?"

"Yeah."

"The feeling is mutual."

He seems incredibly skeptical about everything I've said, even though I know he wants to accept it. He's just as afraid to get his hopes up as I was. "But... I don't wanna do this is he's still gonna hate us for it. If he still feels the way he did before-"

"I don't think he does."

"But you don't know." He argues, rolling over beneath my arm and collapsing on his back with a despondent sigh. "I don't wanna get into this again if we're just gonna have to stop again. I'd rather just let it go."

"Baby-"

"No." He cuts me off adamantly. "No baby."

"I didn't mean that kind of baby." I tell him, trying to keep my tone light in an attempt to lift his mood a little.
This really wasn't the reaction I was expecting.

I thought he would be elated. I was expecting him to hug me, and kiss me, and ask me when we could contact Alyssa and get things moving again. I was all ready to be the calm, levelheaded one and talk him out of e-mailing her right away, or calling and leaving a voicemail at her office.

"I'm okay." He declares, taking a breath as he stares steadfastly at the ceiling. "Really. I'm over it."

"You're not."

"I'm closer to it than I was a month ago... I'm good."

I shake my head at him in disbelief, leaning on my elbow as I look down at him. And he avoids my eyes, because we both know he's full of shit. He knows that if he looks at me he won't be able to lie anymore, to me or to himself. Which is why I carefully cradle his jaw in my hand and force him (as gently as possible) to turn his face towards mine. But even then, his gaze goes anywhere it can to evade mine.

Stubborn!

"If you love me, you'll look at me."

"Fuck you." He mutters, trying to pull away from me. I don't want to hurt him, so I let go without a struggle. And then I climb on top of him instead. "What the fuck is wrong with you? Get off of me!"

"Not until you look at me!"

"Jesus, you're pathetic."

"I'm not the one who won't look his husband in the eyes when he's asked to." I retort, unaffected and undeterred by his crankiness as I grab his arms and pin them to the mattress on either side of his head.

He might think he hates me right now, but when he realizes what an idiot he's being, he'll see that I did this for his own good! After trying (and failing) to pull his arms out of my grip, and several unsuccessful attempts to knee me in the crotch, he reluctantly relents and looks me in the eyes. And boy, does he look pissed.

"Okay, I'm looking at you. What the fuck do you want?"

"I want to have a baby with you."

"Tough shit." He snaps irritably. "Can I have my damn hands back now, or was there something else you wanted?"

As foolish (and dangerous) as it may be, I lean down and press my lips gently to his. I'm bracing myself to get bitten, or at the very least be harshly rejected. But even though he doesn't reciprocate at all, he doesn't turn his face away from mine, either. I push my luck a little further, kissing him with ever increasing intensity until he slowly begins to respond. His kisses are tentative for all of a few seconds, and then without warning they turn desperate, almost bruising. It's not anger I can feel coming from him now, though. That was just a front, a wall to hide behind, and it's crumbling.

"I know it'd be less scary to be over it, to not want it anymore, but you do want it." I tell him in a near whisper, nudging the tip of his nose with mine in an attempt to keep him from turning away
again. "I want it. I want it for you, for us... and I know that after everything that's happened this past month, and how hurt you were, it's hard to let yourself have hope for this. But I honestly believe it's going to be okay."

He shakes his head faintly, sadly, taking a deep breath before meeting my gaze. "I'd just started to feel okay with the idea of not having another kid. Like really okay. But I don't know if I have it in me to get there again. If we start this, and something comes up-"

"We'll be okay."

"You don't know that, Taylor."

"I'm gonna tell you what I told Ezra twenty minutes ago when he said the exact same thing to me. Minus the tangent about the perils of locking yourself in a room for the rest of your life."

Frowning at me in confusion, he exhales a soft, bemused breath of laughter. "What the fuck are you talking about? What room?"

"Forget the room, the room isn't the important part. The important part was when I told him that no one can ever know for sure whether or not something bad is going to happen, and there's no way to avoid ever feeling pain or being disappointed. No matter what we do, bad stuff happens. But no matter how much bad stuff happens, we get over it and we move on."

"I dunno..."

"I got hit by a car." I point out bluntly. "An SUV, to be more specific. I think it was a Durango..."

"It was a fucking Highlander, and why do we have to talk about this ever?"

"Because I could have died. I didn't, but it was still one hell of a shitty experience all around."

"Agreed." He mutters.

"And now look at us." I smile down at him hopefully, lowering my lips to his for a moment and soothing some of the pain caused by the mere mention of that living nightmare. "Something really awful happened to us, and it was some of the hardest stuff either of us has ever had to go through... but we made it. We came out of it even stronger than we were before. And no matter what happens to us from here on out, we're always going to make it through, and we're always going to come out stronger. I know that, because we're us. It's what we do."

I can't help but grin as he scowls at me in defeat. "I hate you."

"You only hate me because I'm right."

"No, I hate you because you're sappy and it's gross."

"Uh huh." I nod patronizingly, kissing his pouting lips once more. "You keep tellin' yourself that."

"Are you gonna get off of me anytime soon?"

"Hmm... I haven't decided yet. I kinda like it up here. It's comfortable and there's a nice view."

"How nice for you. Meanwhile, I can't feel my hands." He informs me, and I instantly release my firm grasp on his wrists. Which was a big mistake. "Sucker!"

With a swift shove, he pushes me off of him and onto the bed, and I'm caught so off guard that I
barely have chance to roll over onto my back before he's straddling me and has my arms pinned to
the mattress instead. I could easily do something about it, but he looks so proud of himself. So I
decide to play along and pretend that he has effortlessly incapacitated me, and I am no match for his
very manly muscles.

"I'd like the record to reflect that you fight dirty."

He smirks smugly as he lowers his face to within an inch of mine. "I do a lot of things dirty."

"Tell me something I don't know."

It's one inch. One measly inch between his lips and mine. I can feel his breath on my skin, I swear I
can even feel the devilish smile on his face. But despite how close we are, his lips never actually
meet mine. Just as they're about to, we hear Asta squealing "dad!" up the stairs.

"She is definitely sleeping in her own bed tonight." I declare resolutely. "No arguments."

"None." He groans in dissatisfaction as he wearily starts to get off of the bed, but I reach out and
grab his hand before he's too far away for me to do so.

I'm sure he knows why I stopped him, I can see it in his eyes as he turns to face me. What I'm not
sure of is how he'll respond. "I still want to have a baby with you."

He's clearly torn, wanting to give in just as much as he's afraid to. And I understand that completely.
He lost a lot this year, more than anyone would think, more than it looks like on paper. It broke him
down and made him doubt himself. His world was shaken, nothing felt as stable to him as it did
before, and all he could see was the potential for more loss. But he steadied himself, picked up the
pieces, and found a way to be happy with everything he still had. I don't blame him for hesitating
when he's presented with the prospect of having more.

Having more means having more to lose.

I don't get any real answer from him. He gives my hand a slight squeeze before letting it go and
leaving the room. It's not a no, but it's not a yes, either. And now all I can do is wait until he decides
if this is something he wants to pursue again, if it's something he feels he has in him to pursue. I
believe he does. I believe he's stronger than he'll ever know or admit, and I believe he can handle
anything the world throws at him.

But I'm not the one who needs to believe it.

He does a good job of avoiding me for the rest of the day. Or maybe it just feels like he's avoiding
me. It's not like we're never in the same room together, or that we don't speak at all. But we're never
alone, he makes sure of it. I wish he wouldn't, because I honestly have no intention of harassing him
about having a baby any more than I already have. At least... not today.

Once the kids are all in bed, he has no one to make conversation with except me. But instead of
taking it like a man and talking to me about anything, he tries to distract me with sex. I say 'tries'...
succeeds is probably more accurate.

I'm not about to turn down the kind of sex that's designed to leave me too worn out to even speak!

Or any sex he's willing to offer me, for that matter.

I fall asleep beside him, completely exhausted in the best way possible, and when I wake up the next
morning I'm expecting to find Asta occupying the middle of the bed again. It doesn't matter how
many times he agrees with me when I tell him that she's not getting in bed with us anymore, he's incapable of turning her away and I should probably just accept that. But when I roll over, I see no sign of Asta. Or Tommy. Rubbing my sleepy eyes, I push the comforter off of me and slip off of the bed, glancing into the open adjoining bathroom just to make sure he's not in there. The house is completely still and silent, and I have a strong suspicion about where it is I'm going to find him. Sure enough, when I cautiously turn the handle on Asta's bedroom door and slowly push it open, I find him lying on her bed. He's on top of her comforter while she's snuggly nestled beneath it, cuddled up against him. There's about a foot of empty space on her side of the bed, and he's so close to the edge of the mattress on his side that he can't possibly roll over without falling off of it completely. It's ridiculous. And it's beautiful. And there's no way I can resist the urge to go back to our room and grab my phone so that I can get a picture before either of them wakes up (or he falls on his ass).

With several shots safely stored away on my iPhone's camera roll, and one uploaded to my Instagram, I quietly kneel beside the bed and try to shake him awake without disturbing her in the process. I also make sure to keep one hand on his back so that I can push him onto the bed if he wakes up so suddenly that he starts to fall off. It takes a while to get him to do more than grunt at me in protest, but eventually my persistence pays off and he opens his eyes.

"You know, I only said Asta couldn't sleep in our bed anymore. I never said you had to go, too."

"I didn't mean to." He yawns, sitting up unsteadily and groaning as he stretches his back. "She came in and woke me up, so I brought her back in here. But she wouldn't let me leave, so I figured I'd stay until she went back to sleep."

"And then you fell asleep?"

"I guess."

"You looked pretty comfy." I tease. "Maybe you'd prefer to sleep in here from now on?"

He snorts in dissent as he carefully gets off of the bed and plods sleepily out into the hall. "No, thanks."

"Or we could get some Princess Elsa sheets for our room, too, if that would make you feel more at home?"

"Weren't you the one telling me to stop bringing girls into bed with us?" Touché. "What the hell time is it anyway?"

"Early." I reply unhelpfully while trying to stifle a yawn of my own. "Too early."

A flirtatious smile spreads across his face as he grabs my hand, pulling me abruptly into our bedroom and closing the door behind us. "Well, since we have some time to kill..."

"You woke up fast!" I laugh softly, allowing him to lead me over to the bed and give me a playful push down onto it.

"I had pretty good incentive."

"Only pretty good?"

He shrugs nonchalantly before climbing onto my lap and draping his arms loosely around my neck. "Wanna do something about that?"
More diversion sex?

I'm not complaining or anything, but if he's going to continue jumping on me every time he's faced with the prospect of having to speak to me, I'm going to need to make sure I'm extra hydrated!

By the time he's done with me, I'm in need of another full night's sleep. But the kids are starting to wake up, and we have to get them fed and ready for their first day of summer camp, so mass amounts of coffee will have to suffice.

This summer is the first one that we're spending (mostly) at home since our move to L.A.. The past two summers we've been out on the road the entire time, in this country and abroad, so we never really had to worry about keeping five kids entertained all day, every day. This summer there was no tour to occupy their three month break from school, and I knew I was going to be busy finishing up the album and finalizing tour plans. Jenna has her own life now, so even though she was still willing to pitch in whenever possible, she wasn't able to set any kind of consistent schedule, and I didn't want to leave Tommy to cope with the kids by himself day in and day out. We were starting to panic a little until River came home from school one day begging us to let him go to some day camp in Griffith Park that one of his classmates was going to.

I googled it, and it looked like kid heaven!

They had activities all of my kids would love, plus some they'd never even had the chance to try before, and they went on weekly trips to everywhere from Knott's Berry Farm to the beach. I kinda wanted to spend the summer there myself, but sadly for me, they only accepted kids between the ages of five and twelve. So I guess I'm just gonna have to buy my own archery set and practice my 'Hunger Games' survival skills in the backyard or something.

They're signed up from now until the Friday before school starts again, and Asta's pre-school is open all summer, so we're completely covered! Tommy's probably wishing that wasn't the case right about now, though, because as soon as they're all dropped off for the day, there will be no distractions left.

He cannot possibly think he's going to spend the next seven hours doing nothing but getting me off. He's going to have to talk to me eventually...

Right?
I never went to summer camp when I was a kid.

My only frame of reference comes from movies, so I was aware that what I imagined it to be like probably wasn’t very accurate. I hoped it wasn’t accurate, because it either meant our kids would be doing arts and crafts with a serial killer, or one of them was gonna bump into the British twin they didn’t know they had and chaos would ensue.

Fun for the whole family.

Getting the kids settled in took a lot longer than I expected. I don’t know why I thought we could just walk them from the car to the lodge, check them in, wave goodbye, and head right home. It was more involved than their first day at school!

We had to sign them all in, find them all places to put their backpacks, and go over each of their daily schedules individually to make sure that they were all registered for the right activities (because god forbid they might have to play soccer when they actually wanted to play softball). Even after the kids had been led away by several incredibly perky camp counselors, Taylor and I still weren’t allowed to leave. There were parking passes to pick up, extra forms to fill out (and of course they were all specific to each kid, so we had to fill our four of each), and we were given a check list of stuff that they need to bring with them on certain days (which we apparently needed to have explained to us in exhaustive detail).

It was probably mostly for my benefit. I bet if Taylor had dropped the kids off without me, he
wouldn't have had things spelled out for him. But people look at me and think, "Uh-oh! No way is that guy gonna be reliable!"

At the first opportunity, we ducked out and ran straight back to the car. It was pretty fucking amusing, actually. I felt like a naughty kid sneaking out of summer camp, not a parent on their way to do responsible adult... things.

It stops being funny once we get into the car, though. The drive home starts in complete silence, and after five minutes it's too quiet for me, so I start fiddling with the radio, trying to find something to listen to that doesn't totally suck. It's a challenge, but I'm determined to succeed because when there's no music, the pressure to speak is suffocating.

And I don't even know why!

We've never had this problem before, we've never struggled to find things to talk about. But right now I feel like he's waiting for me to answer this really huge question, and until I do it's just weird if we chat like everything is totally normal. And since I don't know if I have an answer yet, and I don't wanna deal with him constantly asking the question or trying to sway me, I need to keep him distracted. When the kids are around it's easy, but when it's just the two of us, like right now, the only thing I can think of to do is maul him. Repeatedly.

Except that I can't do that while he's driving.

Well... I guess I could...

No, Tommy! Bad, Tommy!

I abandon my quest to find something decent on the radio; I'm not sure such a thing exists in this day and age. Instead, I dig my phone out of my pocket and pretend to be as engrossed in my Twitter feed as possible. I might not be able to distract him, but maybe if I look distracted it'll have the same effect. While I'm scrolling through all of the Tweets I've missed (I should follow fewer people. Like... waaaaay fewer), I spot something posted by one of my friends reminding everyone he knows to come and see him and his band play at Molly Malone's tonight. At least half a dozen people that I haven't seen or talked to in almost a year have replied to tell him they'll be there, and I kinda want to be there, too.

It's a little intimidating to think about seeing them all after so long. It's like I just fell off of the face of the Earth or something, I was so wrapped up in my own life. I don't even know if they'd be happy to see me at this point.

There's only one way to find out.

"You mind if I go out tonight?" I blurt out, startling Taylor enough that I notice him jump a little in his seat.

"Uh... no. Of course not."

"Thanks."

"Where're you going?" He asks as I hit reply on the Tweet and start typing. "Getting together with Isaac?"

"Nah, he's still on tour. I'm just gonna see a band one of my old friends is in. A few people I know are going, I figured it'd be a good chance to catch up and everything."
"That's great!"

I instinctively smile at his enthusiasm. He's probably more excited about this than I am. "Hope so."

"What do you mean?" He frowns uncertainly, glancing over at me before making the turn onto Beachwood Drive. "You don't think it'll be good?"

"I haven't seen any of them in forever."

"Well, now's your chance. You were just saying a few weeks ago how you wanted to start having more of a social life and seeing your old friends again, so this is perfect."

"Yeah, but..." I shrug half-heartedly as I turn my phone screen off and slip it back into my pocket. "It might be awkward, you know? They might be pissed at me for being MIA."

"I'm sure they'll understand."

"Maybe."

"No one can resist you." He teases in an obvious attempt to lift my spirits and ease my nerves. "Believe me, I've tried."

"You have never tried to resist me. Not once."

"You don't know that! Maybe I try all the time, and you're so irresistible that I don't stand a chance."

"Yeah, right." I scoff doubtfully. "I'm sure that deep down you're silently begging for mercy every time we fuck."

"Hey, sometimes I beg for mercy out loud." He retorts with a wicked smile. "There's been more than one occasion where I've legitimately feared that I might not survive having sex with you!"

"So you think I'm gonna fuck you to death one day, is that is?"

"I'm not saying it'd be intentional or anything, but... yeah, maybe."

"You've officially lost whatever was left of your mind."

"You don't know what it's like! You haven't had sex with you, so you have no idea what it does to a person!"

I don't know how we get into shit like this, but I swear it happens on a daily basis. We have these dumbass little bickering matches about nothing. There's no hostility, because it's never about anything significant. That's why it's so fucking ridiculous. We can take nothing significant and have an hour long debate about it!

I fucking love it.

As we pull into the driveway, we're still totally immersed in our little dispute about whether or not my dick is capable of murder (although according to Taylor it wouldn't be murder, it would be involuntary manslaughter). I almost don't wanna get out of the car and go into the house, because I know that as soon as we go inside this conversation is quickly gonna come to an end. And then everything's gonna be quiet, and he's gonna look at me with those big, hopeful blue eyes of his, and I'm not gonna know what the fuck to say to him. Again.

"So... what do you wanna do today?" He asks casually, dropping his keys in the basket on the end
table by the front door and shrugging off his jacket. "We could hang out here and recover from all of the recent not hanging out here? Or we could go for a hike or something if you felt like getting out of the house for a while?"

Both of those suggestions would sound good to me under normal circumstances. But right now they both sound like a lot of one-on-one time.

A lot of talking.

I can get on board with the one-on-one time, but only if talking is limited. Which means...

"I think we should definitely stay home." I tell him as I follow him into the kitchen, lingering less than a foot behind him while he pours himself yet another cup of coffee. "In fact, I think we should stay right here."

"Right here in the kitchen?" He laughs softly, turning to face me and clearly surprised to find me standing so close. I reach up and take the mug out of his hands before placing it on the kitchen counter beside us, and he curiously watches every move I make. "Whatcha doin'?"

"Nothin'."

"So then why'd you take my coffee away? You know I can't function unless I-"

Kissing him is not always a surefire way to shut him up. Taylor Hanson doesn't like to leave anything unfinished, sentences included. But apparently he doesn't feel a pressing need to be heard this morning, because instead of trying to continue speaking regardless of the fact that his lips are preoccupied with mine, he doesn't hesitate to kiss me back. My hands inch slowly down his chest before dropping straight to his belt, but I don't even have chance to unbuckle it because he grabs by wrists to stop me.

"Is this you trying to resist me?" I taunt playfully, leaning in to kiss him again as I try to yank my arms out of his grasp. I can't, though, because his fingers tighten their hold. "What?"

"I'm not trying to resist you. I'm trying to spend ten minutes alone in a room with you without either of us having an orgasm."

Well, shit. That doesn't sound like much fun. "We just spent like half an hour alone in a car together, doesn't that count?"

"No, because I was distracted by driving, so you didn't need to use sex to distract me."

"Can't a guy just -"

"Tommy, stop." He sighs, giving me his most serious look. I hate that look. It's almost as bad as the sad puppy look. "Talk to me."

"I don't want to." Damn. That didn't come out right. I mean, I guess it kinda did, but I didn't intend for it to sound so cold. I definitely didn't want to make him look as hurt as he does. That's worse than the puppy look and the serious look combined! "I just... I know what you wanna talk about, and I know what you want me to say, but... I don't know what I want to say yet."

"I know you don't." He assures me sympathetically as his thumbs soothingly caress the backs of my hands. "And you don't know what I want you to say, either. Because I only want you to say whatever you want to say."
"No, you want me to say I wanna have a baby."

"Not if you honestly don't want to. I think you do, even if you wish you didn't... but I'm not gonna harass you about it every chance I get, I swear. As far as I'm concerned, it's totally up to you. You know how I feel; if you want to do this, I'm in. Just say the word. But if you don't, you don't have to say anything. And in the mean time, we'll just... get on with our lives. Which means you can stop jumping me all the time in an attempt to avoid talking about it."

"So if I never say anything about it again...?"

He shrugs one shoulder in a futile attempt to seem totally indifferent. "Then we never talk about it again."

"What about you?"

"What about me?"

"What do you want?" I press impatiently.

"I want you to be happy."

God-fucking-damnit, he's infuriating sometimes! "Taylor-"

"I mean it!" He laughs, which only pisses me off more. Normal people don't fucking laugh about serious shit! "You don't believe I want you to be happy?"

"I don't believe it's all you want."

"When it comes to us having another kid, it is."

"So you're totally fine with the idea of us not having another kid?" I ask him skeptically. And there might also be a little outrage underneath that skepticism. Because I wanted this so fucking badly, so how can he not care either way?! "It's all the same to you?"

"That's not what I said." That serious look is back on his face again, and it's pretty obvious that he's not finding any of this amusing anymore. "I've done this five times. I've been there for the pregnancy test results, and to see their first sonograms, and hear their heartbeats for the first time. I got to help name them... or have an opinion on it, at least. I got to watch them being born, and hear their first cries, and be one of the very first people in the whole world to ever hold them. I know you wanted to experience all of those thing, and I wanted you to experience them. I wanted to experience them with you. So, no, it's not 'all the same' to me, and I'm not totally fine with us not having this baby."

"Exactly!"

"But what I want more than anything is for you to be happy. If you want things to stay the way they are, then that's the way they'll stay. Will I be bummed out about never getting to see a mini version of you running around the house, cussing up a storm? Yeah." I don't want to smile. I don't want to smile! I hate him. "You're the one who'll be missing out the most, though. I don't want you to regret never having those experiences. Not that we can't still do this in ten years if you change your mind, or even twenty-"

"Ezra and Penny would be in their thirties by then! No fucking way are we gonna be having kids when our kids are having kids! Even your parents didn't push it that far!"

He rolls his eyes at me, smiling softly as he pulls me closer and snakes his arms loosely around my
All I'm trying to say is that it's still an option, and it'll be an option for as long as I can make it one. If you say no now, that doesn't mean you can't change your mind later. I just want you to know that.

I don't know what to say.

He does this to me sometimes. He's been doing it since we first met, so you'd think I'd be used to it. But it doesn't matter how many insanely sweet things he says to me, it always seems to catch me completely off guard. He'll say something heartfelt and romantic (i.e. sappy), and I'll just stand in front of him like a total moron and say absolutely nothing. And when I am finally capable of stringing words together, I'll open my mouth and something childish will usually come flying out, like "fuck you", or "shut up", or "I hate you".

Or sometimes, like right now, I can't even manage to say that much. So I just kiss him instead.

"You're trying to use your wiles on me again." He accuses during one of the incredibly brief moments when our lips part. "Don't think I don't know what you're doing."

"I'm not wiling you." I assure him sincerely, curling my fingers in the front of his t-shirt and luring him across the kitchen as I slowly back my way out of the room. "Promise."

He raises a suspicious eyebrow at me, even as he steers me away from a near collision with the dining table. "It sure as hell feels like wiling."

"If it was wiling, your pants would already be off." I smirk at the distrustful expression on his face. "I'm not trying to distract you or avoid talking about anything."

"So what are you trying to do?"

We reach the stairs and come to a stop, and I let go of his t-shirt so that I can take him by the hand instead. "I'm trying to say something."

"Why can't you say it here?"

"Because it's not a staircase kind of thing, or a kitchen floor kind of thing."

"What kind of thing is it?"

My only response to his incessant questioning is to lean in and leaving a soft, lingering kiss on his lips before giving his hand a gentle tug.

I've never been all that good with words. Every once in a while I'll randomly say something that borders on being profound, or on rare occasions I might accidentally blurt out something schmaltzy. And Taylor's never been offended by my inability (or unwillingness) to be as openly mushy as he is, because he knows it's not who I am. It doesn't mean I don't feel those things, but putting them into words and saying them out loud doesn't come easy for me.

I've always been much better at show than tell.

It's been a long time since we had the luxury of spending pretty much all day in bed. Or a long time since we took the opportunity to, I guess. Technically we could do it every day of the week if we were willing to live in a dirty house with an empty fridge and no clean clothes until our kids were eventually removed from the premises by a social worker.

But we're not, so we don't.
Allowing ourselves to do it once a year, however, probably won't send our entire lives spiraling into total squalor.

Lying here beside him, watching him peacefully drift in and out of sleep, all I can think about, all I can hear in the silence of our bedroom is everything he said to me this morning.

It's not like I suddenly stopped wanting to have a baby with him. Nothing could be further from the truth. If anything, I want it more now than I did before. When I picture us with this baby, and every experience that comes with it, it makes me stupidly happy. And when I think about never having any of those experiences with him, it hurts. Like really fucking hurts. But it seems as though it's somehow less painful if it's my choice than it would be if it was decided for me.

I can't have something taken from me if I never had it to begin with.

Three-thirty comes a hell of a lot sooner than I'd hoped. Taylor is in one of the 'in' stages of his in and out of sleep cycle, so instead of waking him up I carefully get off of the bed and gather up my clothes from the floor. He'll probably complain later, but if I'm going out in search of a social life tonight then I figure the least I can do is deal with the pre-school and summer camp pickup while he gets some rest.

The kids are all smiles when I get to the camp, and they're also all completely wiped out. After school they're usually pretty mentally drained for a while, but they still have plenty of energy. Now it's the other way around, and it's kind of awesome. Asta's the only one who doesn't drape herself all over the couches and chairs in the family room the minute we get home, but she's still happy to hang out in there and play with her toys while I go upstairs to find Taylor and see if he has forgiven me for abandoning him. He texted me while I was at Asta's pre-school, whining about me sneaking out and leaving him in bed all alone. He used an unnecessary number and variety of sad faced emojis. It was pathetic.

But I'm not gonna pretend it didn't make me smile.

Speaking of pathetic, my anxiety over seeing my friends for the first time all year is beyond pathetic. A few years ago it would have been a totally normal thing for me to head into Hollywood on a weeknight to see a show. But even though I haven't ceased going to shows entirely, I usually only go with Taylor or with the friends he and I share. It's my own fault; I never gave most of my old friends a chance to get to know him, I never made an effort to include them in our life. I guess I assumed that they wouldn't fit, that they wouldn't 'get it', because most of them were either single or childless (or both), and I was suddenly married with five kids. Despite Taylor's frequent nudging, I never felt like it was fair for me to go out to a bar with my friends if he was at home with the kids. And eventually I didn't even really want to go out, I was happy to stay home.

I honestly wouldn't blame any of them if they gave me the cold shoulder tonight. I deserve it. I disappeared, I basically cut myself off from them without explanation. Now I realize that I was an idiot for doing that, but just because I've finally pulled my head out of my ass doesn't mean they have to forgive me for shoving it up there in the first place.

The last time I paced around nervously outside a bar this way was when Alex invited me to a JJAMZ show that Taylor was gonna be at. He was trying to set us up, and we both knew it. I almost didn't go in, because I was convinced that nothing good could come from the two of us spending time together.

I was wrong then, so hopefully I'm wrong now.

"Tommy?"
I instinctively turn to find out if the once familiar female voice belongs to who I think it does, and it's a relief when I see the look of elated surprise on Aiyana's face. "Hey."

"See?" Nick grins smugly as he nudges her gently with his elbow. "I told you he was coming."

"I know, but..." Shaking her head in disbelief, she walks over to me and throws her arms around my neck. "It's been forever!"

"Or a year." I tease her lightly, hopefully, wrapping my arms around her waist and returning her hug. "It's good to see you guys."

"You too, honey." She sighs as she reluctantly lets me go and takes a small step back. "Damn, you look good! Don't you ever age?"

"I try not to."

"I hope I still look as young as you do when I have five kids!"

"We're not having five kids, so you don't need to worry about that." Nick quickly informs her before shifting his focus to me. "And where the hell is my hug? I'm a person, too, ya' know!"

"Nice to see you're still the same needy little bitch you've always been."

"Yeah, well, not all of us decided to become a responsible adult overnight, daddy." He mocks as he pulls me into a tight hug.

"It wasn't overnight, believe me."

"Let's hope it happens overnight for you." Aiyana tells him playfully with a gentle slap on the arm. "You've only got four months left to transform yourself into parent material, and you're not exactly a quick study."

"Wait..." I look back and forth between them in confusion, trying to figure out if Aiyana's comment means what I think it does. "You guys are having a kid?"

"Apparently." She sighs in feigned dissatisfaction, thrusting her stomach out a little to emphasize the barely-there bump beneath her sequined tank top. "I was just as surprised as you are."

Nick grins proudly as he throws his arm around her shoulders. "Nothing can stop me!"

"Wow... I just... wow."

I think the appropriate thing to say in this situation is 'congratulations'. And I'm sure that when I'm done staring at Aiyana's stomach like I've never seen a pregnant woman before, that's exactly what I'll say.

"We're naming him Nick Junior."

"We're really not." She objects with a roll of her eyes. "And we're not naming him Wolfgang, either."

"Hey! I'm the husband in this relationship, and if I want to name my son something totally fucking kickass like Wolfgang, I'm gonna..." His words falter suddenly when he notices the extremely unimpressed look on her face, and he hangs his head in defeat. "I'm gonna ask my beautiful wife for permission first."
"Thank you."

"When the fuck did you guys get married?" I ask in shock, still trying to wrap my head around all of the changes they've been through since we last spoke.

"A couple of months ago." Beams Aiyana.

"Vegas, baby! It's the only way to do it. I almost wanna divorce her just so we can do it again."

"I can't believe I didn't know any of this. I'm so sorry, you guys. I've been such a shitty friend-"

"Stop." She insists dismissively, waving off my apology like it's unnecessary. I still don't think it is, though. "You've been busy, we all get it."

"That's not an excuse, though. You all have lives, and jobs, and you still make time for each other."

"Not as much as we used to." Laments Nick somewhat sadly. "Everyone's getting married, or knocked up, or moving out to the 'burbs to buy a minivan... we're getting old."

"No one blames you for dropping off the radar. We missed you, and we'd love to see you more often, but we know that having five kids probably makes it hard to do stuff like this on a regular basis."

And that reasoning might make me feel better if it were true, but it's not. I always assumed the same thing, it was one of the reasons why moving in with Taylor and becoming a step-parent to his kids was so scary for me. I thought it would change everything. And even though a lot of things have changed, it didn't turn my life upside down and inside out in the ways I expected it would.

I changed more than my situation did, and I chose not to make this kind of thing a priority anymore.

"I'm still sorry."

"Forgiven."

"Buy me a drink and we'll call it even." Winks Nick cheekily.

Half of the people who said they were going to show up tonight are already inside, and they greet me just as warmly as Aiyana and Nick did. She was right; not one of them blames me for being absent, no one holds it against me. And after we've finished playing catch up and everyone has a drink in their hands, it feels as though no time has passed at all since we were last together.

I didn't realize just how much I've missed this. I needed to give myself permission to have this in my life again, to be a little stupid for a few hours with my friends, to have too much to drink, and be rowdy, and act like I don't have a care in the world. I think I held myself back from it because it seemed like it would be a step back for me, and that's crazy. I don't have to give up who I was before in order to be who I am now, or vice versa. I can be both without it having any negative impact on my life.

Tonight I may be a drunk idiot, but tomorrow I will get up and take my kids to summer camp, and go grocery shopping, and be a grown up again.

Besides, it's not like I don't have a few adult moments here and there throughout the evening. Like reassuring my friend Seth, who's debating making an offer on a house, that owning instead of renting isn't as intimidating as it seems. Or convincing Nadia, who is getting married next month, that having sex with only one guy for the rest of her life isn't as depressing as her unhappily married cousin told
her it will be. I even manage to talk (or slur, to be more accurate) a very drunk Nick down from an alcohol induced freak out over his impending fatherhood.

Somehow, somewhere along the way, I apparently became the most mature member of our little group. I never thought that would happen! And not only that, I'm now the guy everyone else comes to for pep talks about all of the things that used to be so big and scary to me.

Because they're not scary to me anymore.

I'm too drunk to drive home, so Aiyana and Nick offer me a ride. And somewhere between Molly Malone's and the Hollywood Hills, I slowly start to sober up. At least enough to reflect on everything that's happened tonight.

Three of my friends confided in me that they're afraid of these huge steps they're about to take, even though they want to take those steps. And I sat there in that bar and told all of them that it'll be worth it, no matter how scared they are right now. Which is totally fucking hypocritical of me, because I've spent the last twenty-four hours telling myself that I can't want to have a baby because the thought of having it ripped away from me again is too hard to face.

Since when am I the kind of person who runs away from what they want just because getting it or keeping it might not be easy? I mean, yeah, okay, there's been some back and forth over a few things in my life, but I've always gotten over myself and gone for it in the end. If I hadn't, I wouldn't be who I am or where I am now.

I wouldn't be married to the only guy, the only person, I've ever been in love with.

I wouldn't have five amazing kids at home.

I wouldn't be happy.

I wouldn't be me.
I can't sleep.

For once it's not because there's something incredibly stressful going on in my life that I can't stop thinking about. It's because I already slept too much today. I never sleep during the day. I don't even remember the last time I took a power nap, it just doesn't happen. But since my husband turned into an insatiable sex addict yesterday, I've been expending a lot more energy than I usually do on any given day.

Today was... blissful is really the only word I can think of.

Sex, sleep, repeat. The only time either of us got out of bed was to get food. It was basically how we spent most our honeymoon. Except that on our honeymoon we had food delivered to our hotel room, which greatly reduced the amount of time we were forced to spend out of bed.

The way we spent our time today wasn't the only thing that brought back memories of our honeymoon. There was a feeling of excitement that I had then, a constant rush of exhilaration whenever I thought about our future together. And beneath it was a sense of calm. Certainty. I felt it again today, just like I felt it on my first night in L.A. after I moved here. Standing on the end of Santa Monica Pier, staring out at the endless expanse of ocean, feeling the soft breeze against my skin. I was safe on (relatively) solid ground, and convinced that if the pier did happen to vanish out from under me, I'd simply soar up into the starry skies above, out into limitless possibility...

Honestly, I think that feeling is there every day but I'm too busy to stop and fully feel it the way I was able to today.

Just as my mind begins to drift away in a haze of fuzzy feelings, I hear the faint sound of a car pulling into the driveway. A smile spreads across my face at the thought of Tommy joining me in
bed at any minute, and I'm suddenly glad that I wasn't able to fall asleep before now. But when the car engine remains on, and is eventually joined by the muffled sounds of at least two different voices, that eager smile quickly becomes a frown of confusion. I climb out of bed and make my way into the bathroom to open the small window that looks out onto the driveway. It's hard to see much because it only opens halfway, but it's enough for me to see that the car isn't Tommy's and to hear that one of the voices is female. I still can't make out what's being said, partly because they're too far away, but mostly because they're laughing so much that I wouldn't be surprised if they couldn't even understand each other.

When the car finally pulls out of the driveway and leaves, I head back out of the bathroom and down to the foyer to greet Tommy. But halfway down the stairs I can hear him fumbling with his keys, repeatedly trying and failing to insert them into the lock. He still hasn't had any success by the time I've made it over to the door, so I very kindly open it for him. The look of bewilderment on his face is priceless. He just stands there with his hand outstretched and the (wrong) key pointed at where the lock was a few seconds ago. Then he turns his attention to me and suddenly seems to forget about his struggles with the door.

"You're here!"

"Yes, I'm here." I reply very slowly and clearly, taking him by the arm and carefully pulling him into the house. "It's two o'clock in the morning. Where else would I be?"

"Bed."

"I was in bed until I heard you and your friends trying to wake the entire neighborhood."

He snickers wickedly, which I of course find completely adorable. "Whoops."

"Good thing I came down here when I did, otherwise you probably would've ended up sleeping on the doorstep." I tell him in my most condescending tone, doing my best not to let him see how entertaining I find his uncoordinated gait and mischievous grin.

But he doesn't seem to care whether I'm genuinely pissed off at him or merely pretending to be. He takes a shaky step closer to me, practically falling against me and landing with his lips on mine in a very poorly executed kiss. As hard as I try, I can't keep myself from laughing at his drunken behavior.

"We should get you to bed before you pass out and I have to carry you."

"Wait!" He protests anxiously, reaching out to push me away when I try to wrap a steadying arm around him. "I gotta tell you somethin' first."

Oh, this should be good. "You can tell me on the way upstairs."

"I wanna have a baby."

I pause in surprise, but only for a moment. That initial wave of joy doesn't even hit me, it merely laps at my feet before receding with the knowledge that he's way too wasted to know what the hell he's talking about right now.

"Why don't we talk about that tomorrow?" I suggest hopefully, tugging him across the foyer towards the stairs despite his attempts to resist.

"I mean it." He insists. "I thought 'bout it a lot."
Drunk thinking counts for exactly nothing. "I'm sure you did, baby."

"'Yana's having a baby. I want one, too!"

"And if you really want one, you'll still want one tomorrow. So let's talk about it then, okay?"

"You think I'm drunk."

"I know you're drunk." I chuckle softly as he finally relents and allows me to help him upstairs.

"I make good decisions when I'm drunk." He informs me proudly. "I was drunk the first time I kissed you."

"Not this drunk."

"I was this drunk when I 'cided I wanna be with you."

Charming. "Well, I'm glad that decision panned out."

"I'm gonna have a baby with you." He declares, growing heavier in my arms by the second. Thankfully we reach the top of the stairs before he becomes completely unmanageable. "You'll see."

"I'm sure I will." After adjusting my hold on him enough so that I feel confident that I can navigate him into our bedroom without him falling over and waking the kids, I start to guide him down the hall towards the open door. But just as we cross the threshold, something less humorous than our prior conversation crosses my mind. "Where's your car?"

"Huh?"

"Someone drove you home, so... where's your car?"

"Dunno." He sighs unconcernedly as I release my grasp on him and watch him fall face first onto the bed.

"You don't know where your car is?"

After a slight struggle he manages to roll himself onto his back, with his dead-weight legs dangling over the edge of the mattress. Then he looks right at me (though I doubt I'm in focus to him) and smirks. "Dude, where's my car?"

"Tommy!"

"I'll remember tomorrow." He replies with a flippant flail of his arm. "I'm tired."

Heaving a weary sigh, I take his legs and lift them up onto the bed for him before untying his boots and slipping them off of his feet. I'm not even going to bother trying to take off his shirt, because that would involve getting him to sit up, or at least raise his arms a little, and I really don't see either of those things happening. But because I love him, no matter how drunk and stupid he is, I put in the effort to remove his jeans so that he'll hopefully be more comfortable.

I haven't even slipped back under the sheets beside him before he starts snoring.

It's rare for him to drink however much he must've drank in order to end up this out of it. I guess he and his friends were celebrating their reunion. I'm not saying it's a bad thing; everyone's allowed to over-indulge from time to time. It could be argued that we over-indulged in sex today, and obviously I have no problem with that.
He's so knocked out that he doesn't even stir when Asta tries to climb into bed with us at three am. I take her back to her own bed, and somehow not only do I get her to stay in it but to go back to sleep as well. Then I manage to get about four hours of sleep before my alarm goes off (which he also sleeps through) and I need to get up and get the kids ready for camp and pre-school. While I'm busy chasing River and Viggo around to make sure that they brush their teeth, Asta sneaks back into our bedroom to find Tommy and wake him up. But even her bouncing around on the bed doesn't bring him back to the land of the living, all he does is shove his head under a pillow until I come in and restrain her.

When I get home from dropping the kids off and find that he's still in bed, I decide he's had a sufficient amount of sleep and it's time for him to face the day. I take a steaming cup of black coffee up to the bedroom and place it on the nightstand beside him, watching to see if the smell of it will be enough to rouse him. But he's not me, so it has no effect on him whatsoever.

"Hey." I shake his shoulder, gently at first but gradually becoming more insistent when he refuses to open his eyes. "Time to wake up, lush."

He groans in discontent as he covers his face with his arm. "Five more minutes."

"Nope. It's ten, and you've been asleep since two. If I let you sleep any longer, you're gonna feel even worse when you finally do drag yourself out of bed."

"I hate you."

"You're welcome." I smile as he grudgingly opens his eyes and almost immediately clamps them shut again. "Exactly how much did you drink last night?"

"Too much." With a tired sigh, he slowly forces himself to sit up against the pillows behind him. "I'm out of practice."

"Well I'm glad you had fun, even if you are paying for it now."

"I think I had fun... I'm not entirely sure." He frowns uncertainly as he reaches for the coffee I left on his nightstand. "Did I say anything about it when I came home?"

"You seriously don't remember?"

After a long moment of silence while he tries to recall details of his evening, he shakes his head faintly. "I remember getting to Molly Malone's... I remember seeing a bunch of people I know, and watching my friend's band play... but it's like it's all kinda broken up, you know? Like bits and pieces, and I'm not even sure how much of it actually happened."

"I can't help you out with any of what happened before you got home, but I can tell you that you were possibly drunker than I've ever seen you, and you couldn't tell me where you parked your car."

"My car?" He asks worriedly. "It's not here?"

"No, thank god. If it was here, it would mean you drove yourself home when you couldn't even walk straight." I point out as he places his mug back on the nightstand, grimacing at the bitter taste of the coffee.

Weirdo.
"How’d I get back here? Did I take a cab?"

"No, I'm pretty sure your friends dropped you off."

He looks incredibly confused for a moment, but something definitely starts to come back to him. I can actually see it in the way his expression changes. "Aiyana drove me. She was the only one who wasn't drinking."

"Probably because she's pregnant."

"How the fuck do you know that?"

"It was one of the few things you told me last night that made any sense." I tease him lightly. "Well, actually, you told me that 'Yana was having a baby. I assume 'Yana and Aiyana are the same person?"

"Ugh." He groans miserably, covering his face in embarrassment. "Did I say anything else?"

"Not really. Just that you were blackout drunk when you decided you wanted to be with me."

"Fuck, seriously?"

"I always wondered what it was that tipped the scales in my favor."

Glaring at me, he grabs the pillow from my side of the bed and makes a pathetic attempt at hitting me with it. Unfortunately for him I'm not hung-over, and therefore my reflexes are much quicker than his.

"It's not as bad as it sounds." He grumbles sulkily.

"I don't think it sounds bad at all. I can't wait until we have grand kids and they want to know all about how we met, and fell in love, and wound up together. After everything we went through, all that heartache and longing, the thing that finally made you realize we were meant to be together was a bottle of bourbon."

"Shut up."

"It's beautiful!" I continue to taunt him as he throws the sheets of f and gets out of bed. "I think I'm gonna write a song about it."

"Yeah, you do that." He mutters on his way to the bathroom. "I'll be in the shower, trying to wash away the shame."

"Good luck with that."

I keep the smile on my face until the door closes behind him, just in case he turns around. But the second I'm alone, that smile begins to fade. I take a seat on the edge of the bed, trying to absorb our conversation, trying to accept the fact that he doesn't remember most of what happened last night. He doesn't remember what he said to me when he came home. I brushed off his assertions that he wanted to have a baby, I wrote it off as drunken rambling and figured he'd take it back first thing this morning. So why am I so disappointed by the fact that he doesn't even recall saying it?

The end result is the same.

I wish I knew what to do, what's best for him. I love him so damn much, I want him to have everything he wants. And I know he still wants to have a baby. It feels wrong to keep my mouth shut
about it, to let him talk himself out of trying for something that he was so excited about and wanted so badly. But I told him I wasn't going to badger him about it, and I now I have to keep my word.

Who knows, maybe that is what's best for him. Regardless of how it feels for me.

While he's finishing up showering, I head back down to the kitchen to fix him some tried and true hangover food. And as I'm doing it, I repeatedly tell myself to forget about the life we could have, and focus my attention on the one we're already living. Que sera, sera. Or whatever. The point is, I can't afford to spend all day pouting about Tommy's memory loss when our refrigerator is almost empty, our pool needs cleaning, and there's a quarter inch layer of dust on every surface in the house!

"Mmm... toast." Tommy exhales gratefully as he walks into the kitchen behind me and makes a beeline for the plate of toast sitting on the counter beside the stove. But before he can snatch a slice up, I start scooping scrambled eggs on top from the frying pan in my hand. "Stop! You're ruining it!"

"You can't eat dry toast and nothing else."

"Yes I can!"

I pick up the plate and a glass of orange juice, nudging him towards the dining room. "The eggs help, and you know it."

"But I don't want them." He whines childishly as he trudges over to the table and drops down heavily into the nearest chair. "They're squishy. I can't be dealing with that right now, I'll puke."

"Eat your damn eggs." I command in the tone I usually reserve for the kids when they're being difficult. "And drink your juice."

"Yes, mom."

He's such a brat sometimes. I try not to let him see how amusing I find it, because I'm pretty sure I'm not supposed to think he's cute when he's acting like a surly teenager. But there are very few things he does that I don't find cute, and I'm pretty sure he knows it.

"How'd the washing away of the shame go?"

"It barely worked." He replies, prodding at his breakfast with a fork for a moment before finally stabbing a mouthful of it onto the prongs. "I still feel gross."

"Think you'll be up to doing some grocery shopping later? Or do you need to hibernate today?"

"I'll be okay."

That was so convincing. "It's fine if you wanna stay home, I don't mind going alone."

"But that would make me a total fucking jackass." He sighs tiredly, dropping his fork onto his plate and pushing it aside before folding his arms across the table top and burying his face in them. "I told myself I was gonna be a grown up today."

"You can be a grown up tomorrow." I chuckle softly as I take a seat beside him and soothingly rub his shoulders. "You've got the rest of your life to be a grown up. Take the day off."

"Why're you being so nice to me?" Comes his muffled reply. "Tell me I'm an irresponsible jerk."

"No."
"Tell me I can't do dumb shit like this ever again."

"No."

"Help me!"

"Trust me, the sympathy and understanding are for your own good. You'll thank me for it one day." I assure him patronizingly as he raises his head just enough to glare at me. "Now be a good boy and eat your eggs."

"You eat my eggs."

"That just sounds... wrong." I cringe, getting out of my chair and taking a few steps back towards the kitchen before remembering an incredibly important question I meant to ask him this morning.

"Tommy?"

"What?"

"Where's your car?"

At first he looks thoroughly confused, and I start to worry that he might not be able to remember at all. But after several long seconds of frowning at the wall, his eyebrows jump in realization. "On Crescent Heights, off of Fourth Street."

"Okay, I'll find it."

"No, I can-"

"Sit." I tell him with feigned sternness. "Eggs."

"If you don't shut the fuck up about the damn eggs, I'm gonnathrow 'em at you."

"Don't hurt yourself."

I leave Tommy to nurse his hangover (and hopefully eat his eggs) while I take Uber to the intersection nearest to where he seems to think he left his car. Lucky for both of us, he got it right. He also got a parking ticket, but at least the car didn't get towed.

Should I be mad at him right now?

If I take a step back and look at this situation from an outsiders perspective, I can see how it would be totally reasonable and justified for me to be frustrated and upset. He went out and got drunk, beyond drunk, left his car somewhere near La Brea, got a seventy dollar ticket, came home in the early hours of the morning and needed help just to open the front door, told me he wanted to have a baby and then forgot that he ever said it, and slept in while I dealt with the kids. When he did wake up, he was cranky and pathetic, and then he threatened to assault me with the scrambled eggs I made for him!

I have every reason to be pissed off... but I'm not.

Maybe I would be if this was a weekly occurrence, but this is something he never does. I don't see it become something he'll make a habit of. At the end of the day I know that it's good for him to go out with his friends every now and again, whether he drinks or not. And what's good for him is good for us. So, as crazy as it probably sounds, I'm glad he got wasted.
With Tommy's car safely recovered, I get back to my original plan for the morning and swing by the grocery store on the way home. Our weekly food run is usually pretty huge; five kids eat a lot, and I do my share of snacking, too. But this isn't a normal shopping excursion, this is a 'restock the entire kitchen' excursion. When the girl at the checkout sees me coming, with a mountain of food piled precariously in my cart, I swear her jaw drops. She looks as overwhelmed by it as I feel, and she's not the one who's gonna have to unpack it all later.

Tommy is feeling a little more human by the time I make it home, so at least I don't have to unload the groceries all by myself. When I proudly present him with his parking ticket he's incredibly remorseful and swears he'll never go out drinking again, which seems like a bit of an overreaction if you ask me. But he doesn't ask me, because he's too busy cussing himself out and apologizing to me to notice that I'm not even slightly upset about the whole thing.

"Are you done beating yourself up now?" I ask when he eventually stops berating himself for an entire ten seconds.

"For now." He mutters as he finishes loading up the vegetable drawer in the fridge. "It was all starting to sound too same-y. I wanna come up with some more original insults."

"I love you, but you're an idiot."

"Yeah, I know. Didn't you hear me call myself one like a dozen times just now?"

"I tuned you out after the first five minutes." I lie, turning a few tins of black beans and crushed tomatoes in the cupboard so that the labels are all facing the right way. Because I have issues.

"So... what's next?" Asks Tommy, looking around the kitchen in search of a follow-up chore.

At about this time almost every week, I seriously contemplate calling up a maid service and paying someone else to clean the house. But then I remember that I'm an able-bodied adult who is perfectly capable of taking care of his own home and has no good excuse (besides laziness) not to.

"We should probably clean this place up. We might not have been here for three weeks, but apparently dust doesn't take a vacation when we do."

"Dust can go fuck itself." He declares indifferently. "What else?"

"Uh... the pool needs skimming, it's full of leaves."

"Ugh. All this stuff sucks."

"Welcome to adulthood." I joke as I prod him lightly in the stomach, causing him to recoil and smack my hand away. "If you don't wanna clean the house or the pool, what do you wanna do?"

"Well-"

"No sex!" I tell him semi-seriously before he has a chance to answer me. "At least, not until we do something that could legitimately be considered productive."

"I don't wanna have sex with you anyway. We've had too much sex lately; it's gettin' old."

Asshole. "I totally agree."

"We should do something we haven't done in a while."

"Like...?"
He shrugs casually as he leans against the kitchen counter behind him. "Well... we could look through some surrogate profiles, if you want?"

"I don't... I mean... but... what?" I stammer like an idiot, completely caught off guard by his suggestion. "What're you talking about?"

"I told you last night that I wanted to have a baby-

"You said you didn't remember that!"

"I didn't when I woke up, but things have been coming back to me all morning. Like how I realized it was crazy for me to pretend not to want this just because it's scary to think about losing it again."

"That's what I've been trying to tell you!" I exclaim incredulously, leaving him with an amused smile on his face.

"I know. But I needed to figure it out for myself."

"And now you have?"

He gives a single nod. "Now I have."

"So... do you want to call Alyssa and ask her-

"Already did it while you were at the store." Wow. And here I was thinking he spent the whole time on the couch wishing he was dead! "I thought we were gonna have to start from scratch, basically, but she said you never canceled our contract."

"Oh... yeah, I mean... I figured that if we could just kind of put things on hold for a while instead of calling the whole thing off, it'd be easier to get back on track if Ezra came around. I told her we'd get back to her in a few months if things changed, and she said that was fine."

"Well she didn't just put stuff on pause or whatever, she still kept us in mind anytime she came across someone she thought might be a good match for us."

"Seriously?"

"She said she'd e-mail the profiles to you." He tells me as I immediately pull my iPhone out of my pocket and check to see if I have any new notifications.

There are three new messages in my email inbox. One is from Bex, one is spam... and the most recent one is from Alyssa. I don't even know what to say or think. This is definitely not how I thought I was going to spend my day, but it's far better than anything I had planned. And despite how cool and calm he's playing it right now, I know that Tommy's heart is likely beating just as quickly as mine is. There's no way he's not as excited about this as I am; he's probably more excited.

"I got the e-mail." I turn my iPhone to face him, as though he won't believe me until he actually sees it. "Wanna get my laptop and look at the profiles?"

"Sure." He pushes himself away from the counter, walking towards the dining room in search of my computer, acting about as enthusiastic as he would be if I'd just asked him to go online and pay a bill.

"Tommy?"

"Yeah?"
"We're gonna have a baby."

The corner of his mouth twitches for a second, begging to be allowed to form an elated grin. But he fights it back, offering me nothing more than a half smile and a nod of acknowledgement before leaving the room. I guess he's still afraid to want this, to hope, even if he agreed to try. Last month I was worried about him being too optimistic and not preparing himself for the chance that something might go wrong, and now I have the opposite concern. I want him to be optimistic, I want him to be happy.

I want him to allow himself to be happy.
The very first batch of surrogate matches Alyssa sent us last month were... okay. They all sounded nice enough, but obviously none of them stood out to us because despite how desperate we were to keep things moving forward, we never bothered to set up meetings with any of them. This second batch was a different story. Of the six profiles she'd collected for us over the month or so since I'd put a hold on our search, two of them caught our attention, and Alyssa was able to arrange meetings with both of them within the next week. We're meeting the first couple this Friday, and the second couple on Monday morning. I'm trying not to get my hopes up, but it's hard.

Especially because I feel as though it's my job to hope enough for two.

After we got word from Alyssa about the meetings, there was nothing more to be done on our end (aside from coming up with a list of questions we wanted to make sure we asked both surrogates). So we've done our best to put it out of our minds and act like everything is totally normal. I can't tell whether or not Tommy is acting, though. Usually I can see through him when he's trying to hide his feelings from me. But I can't read him at all anymore when it comes to this particular subject. I think maybe some part of him has decided to pretend that none of it is actually happening, and that nothing is going to come of these meetings. He's got himself so convinced that he genuinely believes he doesn't care all that much.

I'm not sure what it's going to take to snap him out of it, honestly. I'm hoping that the more real it gets, the more secure he'll feel about allowing himself to be happy and accept that it's not going to be taken away from him again. But I don't know how real it's going to have to get in order for him to start being excited. Maybe once we've chosen a surrogate, and all of the legalities have been figured out, and the paperwork has been finalized? Or maybe when they do the embryo transfer? Maybe it won't happen until our surrogate has that all important positive pregnancy test result.

I sure as hell hope I don't have to wait for the baby to be born before the joy of impending parenthood kicks in for him!

One of the best ways we came up with for keeping our minds off of the first surrogate meeting
tomorrow, other than focusing on the kids, is having some friends over for the evening. I haven't seen Alex in almost two months, which is way too long in my opinion. But between our original surrogate search, him recording and rehearsing new music, and my trip to Tulsa, there hasn't been a whole lot of free time for us to spend together. I can't even remember when I last saw Z! And for Tommy it's been even longer since he's hung out with either of them. They're heading out on their first tour as 'Phases' in a few weeks, so there's a good chance that this will be the last we'll see of them for another month or so, at least.

I tried to hide the fact that they were coming over from the kids, but they're too smart for my tactics. Maybe smart isn't the right word; sneaky is probably more accurate. A little eavesdropping from Penny after dinner, and suddenly they all knew that Alex and Z were supposed to be coming over right after they went to bed. But once they knew about it, they all refused to go to bed without getting to say hi to them.

The boys all love Alex. Between his endless energy and his willingness to act completely crazy on command, he's probably one of their favorite people in Los Angeles, if not the entire world. No one can compete with Uncle Zac, but Alex comes in a close second. No other adults in their lives are as game for acting like oversized children as the two of them.

And Penny adores Z. I'm pretty sure she wants to grow up to be just like her (or Taylor Swift). Whenever she sees her she gets this awed look on her face, like she's standing in the presence of a real princess or a unicorn or... something. Something pretty and sparkly that a ten year old girl would worship. But after spending ten minutes in a room with Z, Penny stops shamelessly staring at her and starts studying her. The way she talks, the way she laughs, the way she walks, her mannerisms, her hairstyle, her clothes. And she'll spend the next week or so trying her hardest to emulate her. It's kind of adorable, except for how short she tries to wear her skirts. I cannot get on board with that part. Maybe in ten years. Or twenty.

Maybe never.

Probably never.

Of course, letting the kids "say hi" turns into letting them stay up half an hour past their bed times. Though it was technically less about us letting them stay up than it was them conning their way into staying up late because they're cute and have developed selective deafness (especially to the words "bed" and "sleep"). In order to finally get them to say goodnight and go upstairs, I have to promise to invite Alex and Z over earlier in the day next time. And soon.

"We need to visit you guys more often." Chuckles Z as she and Alex follow me and Tommy down the stone steps that lead to the patio by the pool. "I can't think of anywhere else where I can get good wine, good company, and that big of an ego boost for free without having to perform first!"

"Seriously." Alex agrees, taking his seat at the patio table and setting his beer down on the glass surface. "Your kids make me feel like more of a rock star than any crowd of fans ever has."

"That's why we keep 'em around." Jokes Tommy with a sly smile. "The blind adoration."

"Speaking of blind adoration, we still haven't been to one of your shows." I remark somewhat ashamedly. "Do you have an L.A. date on the tour? I wanna camp out for front row."

Tommy shakes his head at me in exaggerated shame. "I married a total loser."
"You won't be saying that when you see my glittery 'I Heart Alex' sign."

"I won't be saying anything, I'll be too busy filing for divorce!"

"We already played a few shows down here last month. All of which you missed." Accuses Alex as he scowls at me from across the table. "Some friend you are."

"That's why I was asking! I wanna make it up to you by being the biggest fanboy you've ever had."

"You already are the biggest fanboy I've ever had." He grins cheekily. "Emphasis on big. Emphasis on had."

And for emphasizing those things, he receives a 'fuck you' kick in the shin from Tommy.

"If you're free next Friday, we're playing a show at Morongo Casino." Z shrugs, but Alex is already shaking his head adamantly and trying to swallow his mouthful of beer as quickly as he can in order to protest further.

"Nah, they don't wanna come to that one. It's like two hours away. And that's if traffic isn't shit, which it always is." He insists with such certainty that I can't help but wonder why he's trying to talk us out of coming to the show when usually he'd be trying to guilt us into coming.

"Two hours isn't that bad." I shrug unconcernedly, turning to Tommy to gauge his level of interest. "Maybe we can get Jenna or Lisa to watch the kids, and we could book a room at the casino? Make a real night of it?"

"Fuck yeah!" His eyes light up immediately, and he wastes no time fishing his phone out of his pocket, presumably to text his sister.

"There might not be any tickets left." Alex continues to try to dissuade us, which unfortunately for him only makes me more determined to go. "And the hotel might be totally booked."

"Then we'll stay somewhere else." Tommy replies dismissively as he continues to type on his phone. "Anywhere with a bed and a lockable door works for me."

"Why're you being so fucking lame about it?" Asks Z in amusement, poking Alex playfully in the arm. "You've been harassing them about coming to a show for months."

"It's not even our show, though. We're not the main act-"

"Who is the main act?" I press, growing more and more intrigued by his behavior with every passing second. But when his eyes meet mine, I have a strong suspicion I know the answer before Z confirms it for me out loud.

"It's Adam Lambert. I'm kinda surprised you guys weren't already planning to go."

Now I wish I'd just let Alex dissuade us.

My gaze automatically darts to Tommy's face, the way it always does whenever Adam's name comes up in conversation, or on the TV or radio. He's still staring at his phone, pretending to be completely unaffected by this piece of information. But his fingers aren't typing nearly as deftly as they were a minute ago. It's as though he suddenly has to think very carefully about every single letter before he presses it.

"We're on the same label." Alex explains almost apologetically. "We weren't asked to do it so much
"It's cool." Tommy shrugs, refusing to look up from the screen. "It'll be great exposure for you guys."

"Yeah, but..."

Z frowns as Alex's voice trails off sadly, and everything becomes uncomfortably quiet. After glancing back and forth between Tommy and Alex a few times, she shoots a questioning stare my way. But all I can do is nod my head towards Tommy and give her a very pointed look that I can only hope she understands.

"Oh... shitballs." She murmurs, her face falling as realization finally sets in. "I'm sorry, I'm so fucking blonde. I totally forgot about what happened with him."

"I'm fine." Tommy continues to insist as he boldly raises his eyes to meet all of our concerned gazes and forces a confident smile. "It's not a big deal. I mean, we're still friends and everything." Friends who haven't spoken in almost 4 months. "We just don't work together anymore, that's all."

"You guys don't have to come." Z assures him sympathetically. "There'll be tons of other shows."

Tommy looks at me expectantly, but all I can do is look helplessly back at him until he tells me exactly what it is he wants me to do here. "Tell them I'm fine."

Uh... "He's fine."

"Tell them we're going. End of subject."

"We're going." I nod emphatically. "End of subject... apparently."

"Did I say 'apparently'?!" Tommy chastises me teasingly.

"No sir, you did not. I was insubordinate, and you should punish me however you see fit."

"Can we watch?" Z giggles as Alex eagerly claps his hands together and starts pleading with god under his breath. "I won't take pictures, skank's honor."

Those two are so completely made for each other. "Maybe later."

"You need to keep your woman satisfied, Greenwald." Tommy informs Alex condescendingly. "Poor thing needs to live vicariously through a couple of gay guys to get her rocks off."

"My needs are totally unmet." Concurs Z, turning to Alex with a pitiful pout on her lips as she bats her eyelashes at him. "Why don't you love me?"

"Knock it off." He warns her playfully before throwing an arm around her shoulders, practically holding her in a headlock while he kisses the top of her head and she giggles uncontrollably. "You can hardly handle the level of satisfaction I provide."

"Maybe she's fakin' it."

"Maybe you should ask your hubby if he ever needed to fake it when he was with me, 'cause he always seemed more than satisfied when I-"

"Or maybe we should change the subject!" I cut him off quickly, despite the fact that I know it's all in good fun.
Or something that vaguely resembles good fun.

This is what they do. It's what they've done since the day they met, pretty much. And yeah, okay, there's a small amount of significance to it, and maybe once or twice it has veered into less amusing territory. But for the most part it's not about jealousy or about my relationship with either of them. It's about the twisted amount of joy they get out of annoying the crap out of each other. I simply happen to be the most convenient (and merciless) weapon that Alex has in his armory to use against Tommy. Just like calling Alex's 'skills' into question is almost always Tommy's go-to take-down.

"So what're you guys up to for the rest of the summer?" Asks Z in a none-too-subtle attempt to redirect the conversation back to a safer topic. "Are the kids driving you nuts yet?"

"Not so far. But they're at camp pretty much all day, every day."

"The person who came up with the concept of summer camp is a fucking genius." Tommy declares, raising his beer to whoever this (very likely dead) person may be. "Now if only someone would come up with Christmas camp..."

I smirk at him as I lean over and peck him on the cheek. "I think you just did, baby."

"Nah, I swear I've heard of something like that before." Alex disagrees, pulling his phone out of his pocket, probably so that he can google it and prove his point. "Some parent somewhere got so sick of having their kids around the house for Christmas break that they felt compelled to pay a stranger to start a festively themed detention center for minors."

"You're gonna make a great father one day." I chuckle while Z shakes her head at him. But the unconcerned smile on her lips makes it obvious that she knows he's full of shit. Because he is.

If we'd had this conversation four years ago, I might have thought differently. I couldn't imagine him hanging out with children back then, let alone parenting them. But seeing him with my kids over the last few years has proved my preconceived notions completely false. Most of the time his role is that of the zany, over-the-top, fake uncle that all my kids love, But there have been numerous occasions where he's been put in charge for extended periods of time and has actually done a really good job of keeping them in line and not letting them destroy the entire house and eat all the sugar! I don't think he sees himself as father material, though. Kind of like how Tommy wasn't able to picture himself taking on that paternal role at first.

I hope Alex gets over that fear the way Tommy eventually did; I'm dying to meet his kid one day!

"Can you imagine if we had kids?" Snorts Alex softly as he kicks his feet up onto the arm of Z's chair, completely ignoring the playful scowl she shoots his way as a result. "They'd be way too good looking and talented for this world."

"I dunno..." Tommy argues thoughtfully. "Sometimes attractive couples have really unfortunate looking kids. It's like their good genes kinda cancel each other out or something. Must be the universe's way of maintaining balance, you know?"

"Then it's a good thing you two can't reproduce, 'cause that'd be one hell of an ugly baby." Giggles Z.

"Yeah..." He forces a small smile as he stares down at the bottle of beer in his hands. "Good thing."

Well, shit.
How many more times are we going to need to change the subject this evening? Is anything safe to talk about?! Even the most innocuous topics somehow wind up finding their way to places they shouldn't be going. Now I'm sitting here wracking my brain for something to say, but I feel like I have to think through every possible outcome of every topic I come up with.

"Anyone want another drink?" Tommy asks as casually as he can, already out of his seat.

If anyone had said yes, I would have offered to help just so that I could get a few minutes alone with him to see how he's feeling, or to at least try to cheer him up. But no one else is ready for another round yet, so I have no excuse to follow him. Not without cluing our friends in on the fact that something is wrong, which I know Tommy would be pissed at me for.

"Is he okay?" Alex inquires once Tommy has disappeared into the house.

"He's..." I don't know how to answer that question honestly. "It's been a rough few months, that's all."

He nods understandingly, and the sympathy he feels not only for Tommy but for me is written all over his face. "Sorry I haven't been around much."

"And I'm sorry for inviting you guys to the Morongo show." Sighs Z. "I wasn't thinking, I totally didn't mean to dredge all that up-.

"It's not your fault, either of you. I guess sometimes the stuff with Adam kinda hits him out of nowhere all over again. He just needs a minute to shake it off."

Sure enough, when Tommy rejoins us five minutes later it's as though none of our previous conversations this evening ever took place. He's chatty, relaxed and appears to be feeling totally fine.

But appearances can be deceiving.

Z and Alex leave just after midnight because we were all yawning so frequently that we could barely make it through complete sentences. As soon as they're gone, my nerves about our imminent surrogate meeting suddenly overwhelm me. I was fine all night, but now all I can think about is how I should have gone to bed much earlier than this, and how shitty I'll look tomorrow if I don't get enough sleep, and how I need to make sure that I remember to take our list of questions with us so that we don't forget to ask anything important.

And Tommy still seems completely carefree.

"We really need to get to bed." I tell him, fighting back another yawn as I gather up the empty beer bottles on the counter before placing them in the recycling bin under the sink as carefully as I can. "We're gonna make the worst impression on everyone tomorrow if we look exhausted."

"I was actually thinking about staying up a while, maybe watching a movie."

Is he serious?!

"You sure that's a good idea?"

"Probably not." He chuckles with an unconcerned shrug. "I'm not tired yet, though. No point in me lying in bed for hours staring at the ceiling when I could be staring at a projector screen instead."

I guess that makes sense. But I still don't like it.
And I don't understand why he isn't even slightly anxious about tomorrow. It's one thing to pretend not to care if we have a baby or not, but this is more than pretending. If he stays up all night watching movies and is totally out of it in the morning as a result, he's not going to be able to fully engage in a conversation with our potential future surrogate. And they might not even want to be our surrogate if all he does is sit there and space out because he's too tired to focus!

"Just... promise me you'll get some sleep?"

He rolls his eyes at me as he takes a few steps closer, leaning in to place a gentle kiss on my lips. "I have years of experience functioning on no sleep. I'll be fine."

"Tommy-"

"I'm kidding."

"And I'm serious."

"I know you are." He assures me, his face adopting an entirely humorless expression in what I assume is an attempt to mollify me. "I know this is important to you, and I'm not gonna fuck it up."

"It's important to you, too."

At least, I hope it is.

He's been so damn bipolar about it all week, about everything, really. I'm starting to question what the hell it is he actually wants. At first I was absolutely sure he still wanted to have a baby. Now I don't know what to think.

"I know." With a nod of agreement he kisses me one last time. "Go get some sleep and quit stressing out."

That's even less possible now than it was five minutes ago.

I'm tired enough that my concern about Tommy's lack of concern over all things baby related only keeps me awake for half an hour or so. But the minute I wake up, those worries return. When I first open my eyes I feel a little disoriented. It's kinda like that feeling you get when you think you might have forgotten to do something but you have no idea what it could be. I sit up, letting my eyes adjust to the early morning light for a few seconds...

And then it hits me, that thing I forgot to do (or stopped doing in order to sleep): Stress out.

Last night comes rushing back to me, leaving my stomach churning with nerves. It definitely doesn't help that Tommy isn't sleeping soundly beside me, which means he probably never came upstairs. I force myself out of bed and into the shower, wishing it really was possible to wash my cares away. But when I turn the water off and step out into the steam filled bathroom, my cares are still all present and accounted for. And they've invited some friends over for breakfast.

Tommy's already making coffee by the time I get down to the kitchen, so I'm just going to have to take his word for it that he actually got some sleep. He seems alert enough. No less than usual, anyway. Maybe I was worrying over nothing; it definitely wouldn't be the first time.

"Morning." He smiles at me over his shoulder, just as he would on any other day. "How'd you sleep?"

"Uh... good, I think. Not as much as I should have, but enough." I come to a stop just behind him,
my arms encircling his tiny waist while he pours coffee grounds into the filter. I feel him instinctively lean into me, and I automatically hold him a little tighter as I kiss the side of his neck. "How did you sleep."

"Fine. I made it about two thirds of the way through 'Red River' and passed out."

Thank god. "What do you feel like for breakfast?"

"Hmm..." After closing the lid of the coffee maker and pressing the brew button, he turns around in my arms until he's facing me, grinning when he finds that we're basically nose to nose. "Toast."

"With?" I ask, pecking the tip of his nose because it's right there.

"Fruit."

"And?"

"And... that's all."

"Oh no you don't. You need to throw some protein in there."

The grin on his face goes from sweet to wicked in the blink of an eye. "Know what has protein in it?"

"Greek yogurt?" I reply simply, like I have no clue what it is he's really referring to.

"Nope. Think harder..."

With unmistakable determination, his hands firmly grasp my hips and force me around until I'm pinned up against the kitchen cabinet. I should protest, I should at least make a show of being responsible. But I don't particularly want to.

Besides, I could really use a good tension release right now.

Tommy is just about to undo the button on my jeans when Viggo wanders groggily into the kitchen, rubbing sleep from his eyes (which thankfully means he can't really see us). "What's for breakfast?"

"Fruit and yogurt parfait with a side of toast." I reply in the most normal voice I can summon while trying to surreptitiously refasten my belt before he becomes attentive enough to his surroundings to notice what I'm doing. "Sound good?"

"Can I have strawberries on my parfait?"

"Sure."

"Okay!"

I feel as though I'm holding my breath as I watch him leave the room and head straight for the TV in the family room to watch cartoons. Tommy, of course, looks incredibly proud of himself, and I do my best to ignore the smug smile on his face while I start getting plates and glasses out of a nearby cupboard. He sidles up to me, until he's close enough to touch me. Only I don't know where he's going to touch me until I feel his hand on my crotch. It shouldn't surprise me, but it does. Enough that I almost drop several glasses on the floor!

"Can I have nuts on my parfait?" He asks oh-so innocently.
"No. No nuts for you!" His smile morphs into a sad little pout, and I have to look away in order to keep myself from laughing. "Go take a shower, you're dirty."

"And damn proud of it."

He smacks me playfully on the butt before heading off towards the stairs, and I stare after him in dazed bewilderment. I'm part amused and part aroused by his mood this morning, but mostly I'm just confused. It wasn't at all what I expected. Then again, I'm having a much harder time than usual knowing what to expect when it comes to Tommy's moods. He's up and then he's down, he's obsessed and then he's indifferent, he's angry and then he's over it...

Like I said, bipolar.
I have a lot of hobbies.

Too many, if you ask Tommy. He says I'm allergic to relaxation, addicted to doing. He's not wrong; I don't know how to just sit and do nothing. And the really stupid thing is, the more pastimes I find to engage in, the less free time I have to enjoy any of them.

Music always comes first, obviously. But that has never been something I consider a "hobby". It's a necessity for me, it's part of who I am, I could never not be a musician. My other interests, on the other hand, are things I could live without if I had to (though hopefully I won't). I've always enjoyed writing; I guess it kind of goes hand in hand with song writing. But I stopped doing as much writing when I took up photography. And then my photography took a backseat to my ever intensifying passion for cooking. Over the last few years, I've taken up hiking, running, and sailing, and Tommy has turned me into more of a TV and movie addict than I've ever been before (if that can even be considered a hobby).

I'm someone who likes to try new things, to push myself, to see and do and be and learn more. I rarely stop to think twice before diving head first into any opportunity to expand my horizons, I'll generally try anything once. But it's the more creative pursuits that I always circle back to eventually, that I never tire of and start to crave when I go too long without indulging in them.

Lately that craving has been for cooking.

Ever since Tommy left on tour, I haven't had much of a chance to spend extended periods of time in the kitchen. I was busy with the kids, and then busy in the studio in Tulsa. I relied on take-out and my mom's home cooking the entire time we were there. Settling into a new routine this week, and wading back out into the anxiety provoking depths of the surrogacy waters, hasn't really left me with much time to think about concocting meals that take more than half an hour to prepare. I noticed towards the end of the week that I was feeling frustrated as I served up yet another uncomplicated dinner of spaghetti and meatballs, so I told Tommy to call his sister and invite her over for dinner so that I would have an excuse to fire up the grill and break out my mortar and pestle.
Yeah, I totally have one of those.

"What time is it?" I ask Tommy as he brings a bottle of red wine out to the patio table and sets it down in the center.

"Just after six."

"And she said they'd be here at six thirty?"

He rolls his eyes at me, strolling across the flagstone and coming to a stop at my side. "For the hundredth fucking time, yes."

"I just wanna make sure everything's ready when they get here."

"It's my sister, loser." He smirks. "You're not cooking for the President."

"It doesn't matter who it is, and you know it."

"I know." He gives a solemn (and patronizing) nod, wrapping his arms around my waist and forcing me to turn away from the grill. "It's okay, I still love you no matter how much of a freak you are."

"Takes one to know one."

"I might be a freak, but at least I'm not a perfectionist control freak. Those are the worst."

I narrow my eyes at him, shifting in his arms until I'm no longer facing him and I can nudge him away with a bump of my hip. "If you want me to burn your food, keep talking."

"You won't burn it. You can't, because it won't be perfect if you do."

"That would be true if I wasn't trying to burn it. If I do it intentionally, it'll be perfectly burnt."

Before he can even think of a scathing retort, let alone voice it, River comes rushing out onto the balcony overlooking the patio to excitedly inform us that "they're here!"

"They're early!"

"Oh no!" Tommy gasps mockingly, pecking me on the lips and giving me a cheeky smile. "The evening is ruined. We should probably just call the whole thing off."

"Shut up and let them in, asshole."

"Shut up and cook my dinner, bitch."

He slaps me on the butt and turns to walk away, but I'm not about to let him leave without some kind of consequence. So just before he slips out of range, I literally kick his ass. I can tell by the glare he casts my way over his shoulder that he'd like nothing more than to come back over here and make me suffer, but he continues walking anyway.

I'm sure I'll be punished for it later (and love every second of it).

For the next few minutes I'm alone on the patio, just me and my grill. It's so peaceful, not a sound aside from the sizzling of the meat and vegetables as I slowly turn each kabob over to check if they're done. I savor every second of it, because I know that I'm about to be joined by ten other people, all of them hungry, and half of them boisterous children. Don't get me wrong, I love the crazy chaos and noise that comes with being surrounded by so many people I care about. But I also yearn for solitude
sometimes, and it's not something I get to experience very often.

"Whatever it is you're cooking over there, it smells incredible." Lisa calls out to me enthusiastically as she and David follow Tommy down the stairs towards me.

"It's lamb." Tommy informs her bluntly. "You're a terrible vegetarian."

She gives him a playful shove in the back, but he barely even stumbles onto the next step. Whether or not my sister-in-law sends my husband tumbling down the stairs doesn't concern me as much as the fact that they're being pursued (or pushed) the whole way by a pack of wild animals.

I mean children.

Mostly my children.

I'm so proud.

"Guys, slow down!" I warn them sternly. "Someone could get hurt."

My words fall on deaf ears, and it doesn't matter anyway because by the time I've finished speaking everyone has made it safely to solid ground.

"Dad, when's dinner?" Whines Viggo, ducking under my arm and positioning himself right between my body and the grill, which is way too close for my liking. "I'm hungry!"

"Can I have some pretzels?" River pleads as he eyes the bowl of salad on the patio table like it might actually be a viable solution to the problem of his grumbling stomach.

I sigh, trying to shoo Viggo away from any and all hot surfaces. "No, you can't have pretzels, dinner is almost ready."

"We wanna swim!" Asta announces while she and Bridget bounce up and down in front of Tommy, knowing he's the one adult present who is most likely to give into their demands. "Can we swim?"

"Bridget, we already talked about this on the way here." Her dad reminds her in a very practical tone that so wouldn't work on our kids. "It's too late to go swimming today, maybe next time."

Bridget's eager expression disappears instantly, replaced by a heartbreakingly sad little pout. She turns to her mom, hoping for a different answer, but Lisa simply shakes her head in refusal. So both Bridget and Asta turn their big, brown puppy eyes on Tommy, and I have to bite my lip to stop myself from laughing out loud over how ambushed he looks. It's tough being a pushover.

It's even tougher when your kids know that you're easy prey.

I guess I should save him...

"Dinner's ready!"

The kids hurry over to their table, and thankfully there's minimal shoving or bickering about who gets to sit where. Tommy sets about pouring various drinks for everyone while I serve up dinner; lamb kabobs and parmesan potatoes for those of us who eat meat, and vegetable kabobs for those who don't. River and Viggo tear into their food like it's the first meal they've had all day, but Ezra exhibits more acceptable table manners. And while Penny tries to help Asta cut her meat into manageable pieces, Bridget pulls the vegetables off of her kabob one at a time, taking a bite of each before dropping it on her plate and moving onto the next.
"She's growing up so fast." I hear Lisa sigh wistfully, and I turn my attention away from the kid's table to find that I wasn't the only one watching them.

"I know. It's hard to believe she'll be getting ready for Kindergarten this time next year."

"No, I wasn't talking about Bridget." She smiles knowingly. "But now that you mention it, she's definitely growing up at a pace I'm not comfortable with."

"Who were you talking about then?" Frowns Tommy, taking a sip of his wine. "Asta?"

"Penny."

We can't talk about this.

It's detrimental to my emotional wellbeing. I'm not equipped to deal with the fact that my baby girl is not only no longer a baby, but she's very quickly approaching adolescence. Soon she's going to start developing crushes on boys (or possibly girls, who knows?), and wearing makeup to school, and wanting to leave the house with her midriff exposed...

Nope.

Not happening.

"We don't discuss that kind of thing in this house." Tommy tells her with a grave expression on his face. "Show some respect."

"Men." She teases condescendingly. "You're all such babies sometimes."

"Don't act like you don't freak out about the idea of Bridget getting any older than she already is." David chastises her. "You complain about it almost daily."

"I never said I didn't! But at least I'm willing to acknowledge that it's happening, no matter how much I might hate it. You men just want to bury your heads in the sand and pretend that your little girls are always going to be little girls. But in reality, it's only a matter of time before they're grown wom-"

"Shh!" I demand, covering my ears in horror while Tommy shakes his head at her in disgust.

"Babies. All of you."

I'd rather be considered a baby than face the fact that my daughter is mere years away from her first date, her first kiss, her prom, her high school graduation...

And Asta is only six years behind her!

I think I need to lie down.

Sensing my impending aneurysm, Tommy quickly changes the subject to how Lisa and David's respective jobs are going. It's an obvious diversion from our previous conversation, but they're both happy to play along like it's the most interesting question they've been asked in weeks.

When they ask if anything notable has been going on for us since we saw them last weekend, I unexpectedly find myself having to stuff food in my mouth in order to avoid telling them every detail of our first surrogate meeting on Friday. I know that Tommy and I agreed not to tell anyone else about our plans to expand our family until everything is set in stone, but the closer we get to it being a reality, the stronger the urge gets to confess to anyone who will listen! And yeah, okay, maybe I'm
hoping that having more people 'in the know', having more people excited about it, will help Tommy to believe that it's actually happening and that it's not all going to come to a screeching halt again.

After dinner the kids head for the movie room, leaving us adults to clean up. I'm not a very good adult, though, so once the dirty dishes are in the sink, I tell everyone to leave them there and follow me to the family room for some much needed quiet (and some more wine).

"So, Taylor, how's the new album coming along?" David asks curiously. "You said it was going to be finished before you go on tour this fall, right?"

"That's the plan." I chuckle softly, heaving a tired sigh. "It's not quite there yet. But Ike and Zac will be back out here in a week or so, and we're going to spend the rest of the month working on getting everything more polished. If we can actually get it all done before August we might just be able to have the finished product on sale before or during the tour."

"Are you looking forward to touring?"

"Yes and no. I mean, I love touring and performing, and if Tommy and the kids were coming on the road with me, it'd be a straight up 'yes'. But..." I try to smile as I glance at Tommy, who is sitting right next to me. But the sadness I can see in his eyes is probably just as obvious in my own. "It's gonna be hard to be away from them for that long."

"Yeah, but you'll be home for a day or two every week." Tommy reminds me in an attempt to lift both of our spirits. "It's not like we won't see you at all for two months or anything."

"It still sucks."

Lisa shakes her head at me in disbelief. "How are you going to pull off coming home that frequently?"

"It took a lot more planning than a usual tour, believe me." I acknowledge sheepishly. "But it was a non-negotiable for me, and everyone on our team knew it. I know it's gonna be a little hectic."

"A little?"

"I'm just looking at it like a series of business trips, you know? There are a lot of people out there who are out of town on business almost all week and home on the weekends."

"I guess it's not so insane when you put it like that..." She concedes somewhat dubiously.

"Oh, no, it's totally fucking insane." Argues Tommy without a discernible trace of playfulness in his tone. "But once he gets an idea in that big, thick head of his it's kinda hard to get it out."

"Like you even tried to talk me out of it."

"I said I thought you were crazy."

"That's stating the obvious, but it doesn't count as a protest."

He shrugs dismissively as he turns his face away from me. Probably because he can't look me in the eyes and say whatever it is he's about to say without that straight face of his failing him. "I'm not gonna waste energy I don't have on trying to talk sense into you. I know from experience that you can't be reasoned with, so why fucking bother?"

"Well, you have my word that you won't have to worry about Tommy and the kids while you're
"gone." Lisa assures me. "We'll check in on them every few days and make sure they're not starving and that the house isn't completely trashed."

"Fuck you." Scowls Tommy, grabbing the pillow sitting next to him on the couch and throwing it across the room at his sister. "I know how to take care of them. I don't need your 'help', so don't think you're gonna be coming over here to like... clean or cook or whatever. Besides, I have way more kids than you, so if anyone is an expert in child rearing, it's me!"

"You're right." She tells him, but I can already tell that it's not a heartfelt statement. "Remind me again what the appropriate reaction is to your toddler giving a sex toy to your dog in front of your mom?"

"There is no appropriate reaction! And if it happened to you, you wouldn't answer mom's calls for two weeks either!" He insists adamantly, glaring at me when he sees how hard I'm trying not to laugh. "You wouldn't think it was so fucking funny if it had been your mom!"

Just the thought of it is enough to wipe the smug smirk off of my face in a heartbeat. He's right, I would have been beyond mortified if my mom had been present when her sweet little granddaughter came running into the family room, waving a dildo in Duke's face before throwing it as far as she could and commanding him to "fetch". I was embarrassed enough that it happened in front of Dia but it was a lot easier for me to get over it and find the humor in the situation than it was for Tommy.

"Speaking of mom," Lisa begins, suddenly seeming much more seriously than she was just a moment ago. "Have you talked to her this week?"

Tommy shakes his head unconcernedly. "Not since last weekend. Why? Is she complaining that I never call her? I swear, unless I do it every fucking day, she-"

"No, it's not that." She sighs. "I just feel like she's been acting a little strange lately."

"Stranger than usual?" He teases lightly, but it doesn't appear to alter Lisa's mood at all.

"She's just been kind of... spacey, I guess. Like something's on her mind and it's really distracting her. You haven't noticed?"

"No. I mean, it was kinda weird that she forgot about brunch, but no one's perfect."

"Maybe she's been thinking about your dad more than usual?" I suggest, instinctively lacing my fingers with Tommy's as I broach the subject. "It's only a few weeks until the anniversary of his death."

"Maybe." He nods pensively. "I can't believe it's been five years already."

"Yeah. ..."

Lisa's voice is barely above a whisper as she speaks. And as it trails off and the room falls into a glum silence, I feel like an idiot for bringing it up. I was just trying to help them figure out why Dia might seem a little "off" right now, but in doing so I've also managed to completely kill the mood and subsequently end what had previously been a great evening.

It's not something they can live in denial about or escape from, though. It happened, and every year at about this time they have to face that fact all over again. Not to mention the countless moments throughout the year where someone will say something, or something will happen, or we'll go somewhere that holds some kind of significance for them as a family, and they'll be hit by a barrage of memories that are as painful as they are precious.
His death will never *not* be this shitty, unfair thing that happened to them, no matter how many years they put between themselves and that day.

It's not long before David reminds Lisa that he has an early meeting in the morning, and for all I know, he's telling the truth. But I wouldn't be surprised or offended if it was just an excuse to call it a night. They follow us through to the movie room to collect Bridget, who is nowhere near as ready to leave as they are. Both she and Asta put up one hell of a fight, even as Lisa is putting Bridget's shoes on at the front door. And when it becomes clear that their pleas for Bridget to stay a little longer aren't going to have the desired outcome, they start begging for Asta to be allowed to sleep over instead. Unfortunately for them, it's a Sunday night, so a slumber party is out of the question. But we manage to pacify them both a little by reminding them that Bridget and her parents will be spending the night here next weekend while Tommy and I are out of town for the Phases show.

We let our kids stay up until their movie is over, but even then they still insist that they're not tired. I believe that Ezra probably isn't, but Viggo can barely keep his eyes open as he whines about the fact that he's "not a baby anymore" and should be allowed to stay up late like his big brother. I'm not cruel enough to inflict a cranky, sleep deprived six-year-old on a bunch of innocent camp counselors tomorrow, though, so he's just going to have to deal with it.

"We should be getting to sleep soon, too." I yawn as Tommy closes Penny's bedroom door quietly behind us. "We've got our second surrogate meeting first thing in the morning."

He shrugs nonchalantly. "Considering how much you liked the couple we met on Friday, isn't it kinda pointless even seeing this other couple?"

"No! For all we know, this couple could be perfect. I'm not going to call it off or go into it thinking it's a waste of time just because we finally found someone we like enough to seriously consider."

"I guess."

Okay, that's *it*. I can't do this anymore!

I've spent the past week cutting him endless amounts of slack over the fact that his interest and enthusiasm for this entire process has been lacking, to say the least. I've tried to shrug it off and tell myself he'll get over it soon, and I've tried to be doubly excited to make up for his apparent apathy. But I really don't think I can keep it up much longer.

I can't just stand by and wait for him to snap out of it.

"What're you doing?" He asks in surprise when I grab him by the elbow and drag him down the hall towards our bedroom. "Taylor-"

"Shut up and sit down." I order him in the most authoritative tone I can without raising my voice and waking the kids. "I'm talking, you're listening."

"Okay, but you should know that you're really fucking hot right now. So when you're done talking, do you think you can keep this whole grabby, surly thing going and-"

"This isn't funny."

"Okay..." He frowns, taking a seat on the edge of the bed and watching me in confusion as I pace in front of him. "What the fuck's wrong with you? You were fine before-"

"No, I was pretending to be fine. I've been pretending to be fine all week because I thought that if I gave you some time you'd stop acting like this."
"Like what?"

"Like you don't give a fuck about anything!" I snap, throwing my hands up utter exasperation. "You said you wanted to have a baby, but it's like you're just going through the motions and you don't actually care what happens."

"I care." He sighs wearily, his gaze falling from my face to his hands. And that one, tiny change in his demeanor is enough to sap the anger right out of me and leave me feeling nothing but sympathy for him. I kinda hate that he can do that to me without even trying. "You know I care."

Deflated and defeated, I slowly approach the bed and sit down on the comforter at his side, curling one leg under myself so that I can turn to face him and eliminate a few more inches of space between us. "I get it."

"Get what?"

"What you're doing." He glances up at me for a second or two, and even though he doesn't admit to anything, I can see the look in his eyes. It's the same look our kids get when they're caught doing something they know they should be ashamed of. "When we first got together, you would literally up and run whenever you got freaked out about something. But after the accident, you stopped doing that. It was like you realized that embracing the things you were afraid of having was nowhere near as scary as the idea of losing those things entirely."

"That's not what I'm doing-"

"It is. I don't know if you honestly don't see it, or if you just want to believe that it's not the same thing, but... I know you, Tommy. I've watched you run from the things you want so you won't have to deal with losing them or screwing them up, and I've watched you bury your true feelings so you won't have to face them. You ran from me, repeatedly. You tried to avoid dealing with how it felt to be back in Burbank day in and day out after your dad died, and you went around telling everyone, including me, that you were fine after Adam fired you, when really you were heartbroken. And every time you do this, you eventually run yourself right into a fucking wall, and everything you were trying to avoid dealing with catches up to you, and you're forced to deal with it."

"Yeah, and I dealt with the idea of not having a baby." He protests in a mumble.

"You haven't accepted the fact that we are having one, though." I point out gently, shifting even nearer to him as soon as he looks away. "First you said you didn't want a baby anymore, even though you did. Now you're telling me that you want one, and at the same time you're still telling yourself that you don't, or that you don't really care if it happens or not. But that's bullshit. We both know it's bullshit."

"So what do you want me to do? Just forget how much it fucking sucked when you told me that we had to wait indefinitely to have another kid? Pretend it never happened, and that it's not entirely out of the question that it might happen again? Or that a million other things could go wrong and this whole thing could go to shit?" He asks, his eyes burning into mine, filled with a devastating combination of frustration and fear. "What's so goddamn bad about not setting myself up for more fucking disappointment?!"

I shake my head sadly as I reach out to him, but he's too pissed off right now to even let me touch him. He jerks his body away just before my fingertips can make contact, and my hand falls dejectedly to my side as I try to figure out how to get him to lower his defenses and let me in.

"There's nothing wrong with preparing yourself for disappointment. But that's not what you're doing,
"baby."

"Whatever."

"It doesn't matter how disinterested you act outwardly, it doesn't change how you feel on the inside. Pretending not to care all that much doesn't make you care any less. So you can keep up this whole 'whatever' routine if you want, but all you're doing is missing out on all of the amazing moments along the way. We should be feeling nervous, and anxious, and excited about all of this together. We should be celebrating every little bit of progress we make together."

"What if there's nothing to celebrate, huh? What then?"

"Then... we hurt. And we'll do that together, too."

He exhales a soft, humorless chuckle as he slowly shakes his head. "Like last time, you mean?"

"What?"

"We didn't hurt 'together' last time. I hurt. You apologized, and you empathized, but you didn't hurt."

Is he fucking kidding?!

"That's not true! I was devastated that we had put everything on hold!"

"That's not how it looked from where I was standing."

"Maybe that's because you weren't standing here! You ran out on me, you went off on tour-"

"You said it was okay!" He argues accusingly. "You told me you understood!"

"And I meant it! I still mean it. But don't sit there and say that I wasn't just as hurt as you were about the whole thing, because you weren't even here to see how I felt. And on top of being crushed about not having a baby, I felt guilty that you were so hurt by it. I felt like it was my fault, like I'd taken it away from you, so I was trying to do whatever I could to make you feel better. And I'm sorry if that made you think I didn't care as much as you did, because nothing could be further from the truth."

After holding my stare for a while, seeing the sincerity written all over my face, his whole body seems to crumble right in front of me. He drops his head into his hands, and even though I'm almost certain that he's not crying, when he lets out a slow, tired breath, I can clearly hear how unsteady it is.

"I'm sorry." He tells me quietly, his voice muffled by his hands. And this time when I reach out to gently stroke his back, he doesn't pull away. He raises his head and meets my worried gaze again, looking so much more worn down and disheartened than he did just a minute ago. "I don't know what the fuck is wrong with me."

"Nothing." I promise him earnestly. "There's nothing wrong with you."

"I just... I didn't realize how badly I wanted it until it looked like we might not have it, you know? And I know it's totally fucking stupid, but even though we'd barely started, and there was no baby... it still felt like..."

"We lost something."

He nods slowly, a faint flicker of a melancholy smile curling his lips before quickly disappearing again. "I'm sorry I wasn't here. And I'm sorry I haven't really been here, like... in this with you the
way I should've been. It's like I don't know how to be anymore."

"It's okay." I tell him, feeling almost as helpless as he looks right now. "It's okay if you're scared or angry or hurt. Just be honest with me about it, don't pretend it's not there. 'Cause chances are I'm feeling something pretty similar, and we'd both probably handle it a hell of a lot better if we knew we weren't feeling that way alone."

Without a word, he turns towards me and wraps his arms tightly around me, shifting his body closer and closer, until he's practically straddling my lap. Any other time, such a move would come across as playful, even flirtatious, and I'd very likely be amused by his attempts to be as near to me as humanly possible. But right now it's not funny, and he's not flirting. He's trying to make up for any and all distance he might have put between us these past couple of months, intentional or not. And even though we both know that nothing either of us does right now can fix or undo anything that we've already said and done, it doesn't matter.

All that matters is that we're in this together now.
“Daddy! River took my LEGO t-shirt!” Whines Viggo, barging into our bedroom just as I finish putting on my own shirt. “He says it’s his, but it’s not! It’s mine!”

Oh good.

It’s going to be one of those Monday mornings.

“River, give your brother his shirt back!” I call out, following Viggo down the hall towards the room he and his brother share.

“It’s not his shirt, it’s mine!”

“It was yours, but you got too big for it, so now it’s Viggo’s.” I try to explain calmly, but I can tell from the disgruntled look on his face that my answer isn’t going to cut it.

“No one asked me if he could have it!” He points out indignantly. “You can’t just give people my stuff without asking!”

“It doesn’t even fit you anymore. You haven’t worn it in months!”

“So? It’s still mine.”

Okay, Taylor. You’re a mature adult and a responsible parent. You can handle this.

“Fine, if those are the rules you wanna live by, then the TV is mine and you can’t use it anymore without asking me first. Even if I’m not watching it, you still have to ask.”

“But-”

“And you can’t watch any of my DVDs without asking, either.”

Mature and responsible.
“Fine, he can wear the stupid shirt.” River mumbles as he grudgingly throws the pieces of clothing at his elated little brother. “But you still shoulda asked first.”

“I’m sorry. I promise I’ll ask before I let him have your old clothes from now on.” My vow to respect his property doesn’t seem to make him feel any less put out, but I’m pretty sure the next five words out of my mouth will. “Who wants pancakes for breakfast?”

The frown evaporates from his face immediately as both he and Viggo begin chanting “me, me, me!” and pulling their clothes on so quickly that I’m surprised nothing gets torn. With my mission accomplished, I head out into the hallway to knock on Penny and Ezra’s bedroom doors and remind them to hurry up and get dressed. Just as I reach the top of the stairs, Asta comes strutting out of her bedroom in an ensemble she definitely put together without any help from anyone else. For a moment all I can do is look at her. I’m so busy trying not to laugh that I can’t even tell her that she can’t wear pajama bottoms to school. Especially not with a dress over the top, a wool hat, and ballet slippers (on the wrong feet). I can’t decide if I take a picture or just keep going and pretend I never saw it.

“Dude, how many times have we talked about this?!” I hear Tommy exclaim in exasperation from somewhere close behind me. “You can’t wear shit-stuff like that to school.”

“Why not?”

“Yeah, Tommy, why can’t she wear ‘shit-stuff’ like that?” I chime in helpfully.

“You can wear the dress, but not with pants. Definitely not pajama pants. Your shoes are on the wrong feet, and that hat’s for when we go to Tulsa in the winter. You’re not supposed to wear it in Los Angeles. In the middle of summer. Indoors.”

“But daddy wears his hats indoors sometimes.” She protests as he shoos her back towards her bedroom.

“That’s because your daddy is a shameless hipster.”

“What’s a hipsir?”

“You’re too young to know.”

“Your jeans are just as tight as mine!” I shout down the hall at him, receiving nothing but an extended middle finger in response.

Most people probably don’t smile when someone flips them off. I highly doubt it brings on a surge of pure contentment, or makes them think about how much they love the person who just gave them the finger. But that’s frequently what happens to me in these situations. He calls me ‘asshole’ and I react as though he used some cutesy pet name. And he just flipped me the bird, but I’m so smitten that he may as well have blown me a kiss instead. It might seem weird to some people, but those people don’t know us.

They don’t know him, so they don’t know that there’s a heartfelt ‘I love you’ contained within almost every hostile ‘fuck off’ he throws my way.

So far this morning I’ve done a pretty good job of keeping my nerves about our surrogate meeting in check. It helps that my kid’s mini-dramas, fashion disasters, and ravenous appetites leave me with little time to think about anything else for too long. But standing in the kitchen alone, pouring
Will this woman be ‘the one’? Or was it the woman we met on Friday? Wouldn’t we have known if it was her? Wouldn’t today’s meeting feel pointless? And what if we don’t click with the woman we’re meeting this morning? Should we ask the woman we met on Friday, even though we weren’t certain enough at the time to cancel this meeting altogether? Or do we wait and hope that someone else comes along soon?

“Dad?” I snap out of my daze suddenly, and the first thing I notice (aside from the concerned face of my eldest daughter) is the smell of something burning.

Shit!

“It’s okay.” I assure her, quickly scooping the ruined pancakes onto a plate and transporting them straight to the trash. “I just wasn’t paying attention.”

She opens the door out to the terrace to let some fresh air into the room before I even think to do it myself. It takes me back to Lisa’s comments last night, about how grown up she is. It’s such a strange contradiction of emotions; I’m so proud of her, of who she is and how she treats people. She’s kind and considerate, confident without being conceited, and intelligent without being an annoying little know-it-all. She’s only ten, but she’s just as mature as Ezra, sometimes more so. It’s scary. I don’t want to hold her back from anything, but I don’t want to let her go, either.

And the day when I’ll have to do just that is coming so much faster than I’m prepared for.

“Are you okay?” She asks curiously. “You never burn stuff.”

“Yeah, I’m fine.” I smile for her. It may only be a half-truth, but no matter how grown up she is, I’m not about to dump all of my inner conflict on her! “Don’t worry, there’s still enough batter left.”

“I don’t care about the pancakes.” She tells me, taking a carton of orange juice out of the fridge and carrying it towards the dining room. “I can just have cereal.”

“Hey, come over here a minute.”

She stops in her tracks and turns to face me uncertainly. It’s clear that she’s worried she did something wrong, but I think she can tell from the tone of my voice that I’m not about to reprimand her for anything.

“You haven’t really told me how camp has been going? Your brothers seem to do all the talking in the car on the ride home.”

“It’s okay.” She shrugs. “Some of it’s fun.”

“Only some of it?”

“I like that we get to do dancing, and art, and horseback riding. And it was cool to go to the beach with everyone; I’ve never gone to the beach with that many people before.”

“But…?” I press gently, wanting to know what it is that’s making her summer less fun than it should be, but not wanting her to feel interrogated and clam up.

She never used to do that, but the older she gets, the more frequently it happens. Apparently it’s normal and I need to get used to it, because the minute she turns thirteen she’s never going to confide in me about anything personal ever again. At least, that’s what Z tells me.
I’m starting to understand how my mom feels when she thinks we’re intentionally keeping her out of the loop.

“I don’t know… there’s this boy…”

Am I breathing? I can’t tell if I’m breathing.

I think I’m gonna pass out.

“What boy? What’s his name? How old is he?”

“Um… his name is Lucas, and I think he’s the same age as Ez, ‘cause they’re always in the same groups for stuff.”

An older guy? This is so much worse than I thought! “So… what’s going on? Why is he making camp less fun for you? Is he mean to you? Did he hurt you? If he did something to upset you, I can talk to one of the counselors, or his parents-”

“Dad, no!” She gasps in horror. “You can’t talk to anyone!”

“Fine, I won’t talk to anyone. But I still need you to tell me what this boy did to you.”

“What boy?” Asks Tommy as he strolls into the kitchen, his brow furrowing in concern as he approaches us. “What did he do to her?”

Penny rolls her eyes at us, exhaling an irritated “ugh!” as she turns to leave the room. But she barely makes it two steps before Tommy holds out his arm like a barricade to block her path.

“You’re making a big deal out of nothing!” She insists. “All he does is poke me in the back and then pretend that it wasn’t him who did it. I told him to stop, but he still says he didn’t do it. I know he did, though, ‘cause Kayleigh saw him. Ez said he’s doing it so I’ll notice him because he likes me-”

“No, he doesn’t.” Tommy tells her bluntly. “He’s doing it because he’s a little jerk, so just ignore him. Don’t look at him, don’t talk to him-”

“I don’t!”

“Good!”

“Can I go now?”

He looks to me for approval, and I give him a resigned nod before he lowers his arm and lets Penny continue her melodramatic pre-teen exit from the kitchen.

“This is not cool.” Tommy informs me as soon as she has left the room. “Boys? Already? She’s ten!”

“Yeah, and he’s twelve.”

His expression noticeably darkens, and if it weren’t for the fact that it’s my little girl we’re talking about here, I’d be laughing at his overprotective and irrational behavior. But it’s a little hard to find the humor in the fact that my little girl is being sexually harassed by some horny little punk!

I knew I shouldn’t have sent her to a co-ed camp.

“If he lays that skeezy finger of his on her again, I’ll break it the fuck off!” He declares aggressively.
“Can I watch?”

He frowns at me as though I’ve completely missed the point. “I figured you’d wanna be the one holding him down.”

Good point.

“Go team!”

As is usually the case on Monday mornings, no matter what time of year it is or what our plans are, we’re running late. Not so late that I have to run red lights or resort to California stops, but we do have to skip the Starbucks run I was planning on making between the kid’s summer camp and the surrogacy agency offices. Some things are more important than coffee. Not many things, but they do exist.

In some ways this meeting is a little less stressful than the one we had on Friday, because now we at least have some idea of what to expect and how this thing is likely to go. And now that Tommy is allowing himself to actually acknowledge his true feelings a little more, rather than burying them and putting all of his energy into pretending none of this fazes him, my natural inclination to take care of him kicks in. When I know he’s freaking out on the inside, it makes it a hell of alot easier for me to put my own nerves on hold in order to help him settle his.

“I miss not giving a shit.” He sighs as I pull into a parking spot on a side street a few blocks from the office. “I blame you for this.”

“There was never a time when you didn’t give a shit, only a time when you pretended not to. And if the choice is between you brushing off your feelings and this being a piece of cake, or you feeling like you’re going to puke because you’re so nervous, I choose vomit.”

“You’re disgusting.”

“Whatever it takes.” I smile at him affectionately, reaching across the gearshift to give his thigh a gentle squeeze.

His eyes immediately dart down to his leg, staring at the spot where my fingers were, even though I’ve already retracted my hand. “Do we have time for a quick-”

“Nope.” I cut him off with a soft chuckle. “Sorry.”

“But it’ll help me relax!” He whines, following my example by unbuckling his seatbelt and getting out of the car. “Don’t you want me to relax?”

“I’ll give you a shoulder rub in the elevator.”

“It’d work better if you rubbed something else instead.”

“Later.” I promise as I take him by the hand and pull him across the street.

“Fine, but the longer I have to wait, the better it’s gonna have to be.”

I try to play along, keeping my expression as serious as I can. It’s not easy when he’s being so adorably sulky. He’s pouting, and scowling, and forcing me to practically drag him along the sidewalk like a child.

“You know I’m good for it.”
“Damn right.” He replies as a small smirk finally appears on his face.

Neither of us says anything for the rest of the walk to the agency, but he never lets go of my hand, and my grip on his never loosens. If anything, we hold on tighter with every step. He won’t even release his hold so that I can attempt to give him that shoulder rub I offered him. It would have been pointless anyway, though, because the elevator ride lasts all of six seconds before the doors open into the waiting room.

My eyes automatically do a quick sweep of our surroundings, taking in the other people sitting in chairs around us, wondering if I’m looking at the very person we’re here to meet. It’s so strange to think that by the end of the day we could have found our surrogate. For so long it seemed so far away, and now it’s in sight. I know it’s still one of many first steps, but at least we’re moving forward and not standing still anymore.

“Oh, good, you made it.” Alyssa greets us brightly as she steps out of the same room we had our meeting in last week. “Was traffic terrible?”

“Yeah, it was pretty bad.” And we also suck at getting places on time even when there’s no traffic at all. “Sorry we kept you waiting.”

“Don’t worry about it.” She waves my apology off before gesturing for us to follow her. “Can I get either of you anything to drink before we start?”

I wanted coffee so badly only half an hour ago, but now I feel as though the act of lifting a mug to my lips would only distract me from what I should really be focusing on, so I shake my head.

“Tommy?”

“Huh?” He tears his eyes away from the door that she’s about to open for us. “Oh, no, I’m good. Thanks.”

“Are you ready?”

“As we’ll ever be…” I chuckle nervously, adjusting my grip on Tommy’s hand so that I can hold it even tighter.

Alyssa turns the handle and pushes the door open into a small conference room, standing aside so that we can go in ahead of her. On Friday we were greeted by a couple who looked about the same age as us. The woman seemed excited and hopeful, it was obvious that she desperately wanted to be a surrogate for someone. Her husband seemed nice enough. He mostly stayed quiet, and I could tell that he was there because he wanted to support her more than he wanted to help us, but the smile on his face never waned for even a moment.

I was expecting to find something similar waiting for us today, which is why I come to an abrupt stop when I see two women sitting at the table. They quickly stand up and offer us their hands to shake, and we put our surprise on hold long enough to reciprocate.

“Hi, I’m Shauntae.”

Shauntae was the one we were expecting. She’s the one who will (possibly) be carrying the baby for us. She’s petite with shoulder length, curly brown hair and big, smiling brown eyes, and we know from her profile that she’s a little younger than us. Maybe she’s not exactly how I pictured her, but at least I got her gender right.

“I’m Taylor.”
“Tommy.” He tells her, as he takes his turn shaking her hand. “Nice to meet you.”

“This is my wife, Sam.”

“Nice to meet you, Sam.” I smile, trying not to stare as I take in her appearance and erase the random dude I’d imagined in my mind. I feel like such an idiot for making the assumption that we’d be meeting with a heterosexual couple.

Sam is several inches taller than Shauntae, and noticeably more slender. In fact, everything about her is almost the complete opposite of her wife. Blonde haired, blue eyed, and judging by the blush on her cheeks, she’s at least a little less confident. Shauntae didn’t hesitate to greet us, and her handshake was strong and steady, whereas Sam’s fingers barely close around mine, and I can feel them trembling slightly when they eventually do.

“Okay,” Begins Alyssa as we all take our seats around the table. “My role here is basically that of a facilitator. I’m here if you have any questions or concerns, and if you feel there’s anything you might be forgetting to discuss, you can definitely ask me for input. Believe me, I’ve heard it all.” She winks playfully, eliciting a round of quiet laughter from all of us. “This is for the four of you to get to know a little bit about one another and see if you feel any kind of connection. Think of it as the most awkward double date you’ll probably ever go on.”

“Okay.” I take a breath to try to ease my nerves, looking across the table at Shauntae and Sam to see if either of them appears as though they might be on the verge of speaking. But all eyes are now on me, so I guess I should keep talking. That’s never been a problem for me before, so I don’t know why it’s suddenly such a struggle. “Well... obviously we’ve read your profile, so we know all the stuff you wrote in it, but do you mind telling us a little more about what made you decide to become a surrogate?”

“Of course!” Shauntae beams warmly. “There really isn’t some inspiring story or anything, it wasn’t something I grew up wanting to do, or had some big revelation about. But when Sam and I had our little girl, we would talk about how it was so much easier for straight couples to conceive.”

“Right? It’s so true! But it got me thinking that what we were going through was still nothing compared to couples who couldn’t conceive naturally at all, whether they were straight or not. At least I was able to carry my own child, you know? I was so lucky to be able to have that experience, regardless of any hoops we had to jump through in order for me to get pregnant.”

“I can’t help but smile fondly as I glance at Tommy, reaching for his hand on the tabletop between us. “We’ve had that discussion a couple of times, too.” Tommy notes in amusement.

“Was your daughter conceived through IVF?” I ask curiously, hoping that the question isn’t too personal so early in our first meeting.

But if we don’t ask these potentially intrusive questions now, we might not have all of the answers we need to make the right choice.

“That’s what we wanted.” Shauntae sighs somewhat sadly. “I really wanted some of Sam in there, too. But we just... couldn’t afford it.”

“And it didn’t matter to me that I wasn’t going to be biologically related to our baby; she was still going to be mine, no matter what.”

I can’t help but smile fondly as I glance at Tommy, reaching for his hand on the tabletop between us. “We know the feeling.”

“Stella looks a lot like Sam, though.” Notes Shauntae proudly. “It’s crazy. If people don’t already
know, they have a hard time figuring out which of us is the biological mother.”

“Was that just like some weird coincidence?” Tommy asks, and I can already tell he’s hoping that they have a miracle solution to the problem of only one of us looking like the baby’s biological father.

“No, we did what we could to make sure that the baby might look like both of us.” Explains Sam somewhat bashfully. “I mean, we got lucky with just how much she resembles me, but when we were choosing a donor, we were definitely looking for someone with as many of my features as possible.”

Maybe all couples in our position do the exact same thing. In fact, I’m sure that most of them do. But right now it doesn’t feel like this is some common issue all same sex or infertile couples face, it feels like we’re sitting across a table from two people who know what we’re going through because they’ve been through it themselves.

That’s something I didn’t really feel from the couple we met on Friday.

“Anyway,” Shantae continues with a soft chuckle. “Unnecessarily long story short, after what we had to go through to have Stella, and how much I loved being pregnant, I started thinking about becoming a surrogate and helping another couple to have what we have. But we decided to wait until Stella started school and a lot of other things in our lives were more settled and stable before we applied.”

“So Stella’s about five-years-old?”

Sam nods, grinning as she reaches into her pocket and pulls out her cellphone. Her lock screen picture is of a smiling little girl with long, curly blonde hair and big brown eyes. She really does look just like both of them!

“She just turned five last month, and she starts Kindergarten in the fall. I don’t know if I’m excited for her first day of school or dreading it completely.”

“The first day is hard.” I commiserate sincerely. “It’s like this weird mix of pride and sadness.”

“You have… four children, right?” Asks Shauntae uncertainly. “Or was it five?”

“Five.” Tommy nods. “The youngest is three, the oldest is almost thirteen.”

“Wow! That sounds like a handful.”

“It can be.” He laughs. “But it’s not as bad as most people seem to think. Not once you get used to it, anyway.”

“So, if you don’t mind me asking… how come you guys are looking to have one more?”

“Well, all five of our kids were born before Tommy and I really got together, so even though they think of him as their dad and he loves them all like they’re his… there’s just a lot of stuff he missed out on. And we both want him to have those experiences.”

“For me, it’s not even so much about experiencing all that stuff for myself, it’s mostly that I wanna have those experiences with him.” Amends Tommy with a nod of his head in my direction, rendering me momentarily speechless and too moved to do anything but stare at him.

He never told me that before.
“That’s really sweet.” Coos Shauntae, lacing her fingers with Sam’s and giving her the same “can I have one?” look that Penny gives me every time we see a baby animal. “And I totally understand why you both feel that way. There’s so much that comes before the actual birth of your child, and it’s such an incredible and exciting time. At least, it was for us.”

“I wouldn’t trade a second of it for anything.” Sam concurs wholeheartedly.

Honestly, at this very moment, I’m having a hard time restraining my impulsive side from blurting out something stupid, like “will you have our baby?” There are so many other things we still need to ask them before we reach that point, not to mention the fact that Tommy and I should probably sit down and talk everything out to make sure we’re on the same page.

But I already know we are. And I can’t think of anything either or these women could possibly say to us over the course of this meeting that would change the way we feel. I can see it when my eyes meet his. The excitement and eagerness that has been missing for weeks is back now. Maybe not in full force, but at least it’s there. This meeting has reinforced the feelings of hope he’d just begun to let in again.

How could he not be hopeful when we’ve almost certainly found our surrogate?
Chapter 27

It’s happening.

I haven’t said it out loud, because I don’t want to jinx it. I’m almost afraid to even think it in case something unforeseen happens and everything goes to hell. But there’s no reason for anything to go wrong; everything is falling into place and it feels right.

Our meeting with Shauntae and Sam lasted twice as long as the one we had on Friday. The only reason we had to end it at all was because Shauntae had to get to work. But if that hadn’t been the case, I’m pretty sure that Tommy and I would have invited them to have lunch with us or something. The couple we talked to on Friday were nice, they seemed like great people, but even though we were all on the same page about the important points, that’s really all we talked about. With Shauntae and Sam we found ourselves going off topic at every turn.

Alyssa had told us all to think of it as an awkward double date, but there was hardly anything awkward about it. Obviously, discussing the more difficult aspects of a surrogacy arrangement didn’t make for light hearted conversation. Talking about what would happen if, for some reason, the pregnancy put Shauntae’s health or even her life at risk wasn’t exactly fun for anyone. But as hard as it was, we all agreed that if it came down to it, her life had to come first. Neither of us would ask Shauntae to put the life of our unborn baby before not only her own life, but Sam’s and Stella’s, too. We’d be heartbroken if we lost the baby, for any reason, but if anything happened to Shauntae it would irrevocably change people’s lives.

I knew that all too well from the fallout of Natalie’s death.
The subject of her willingness to carry multiples and or our feelings on selective reduction were mostly a moot point, because we don’t intend to transfer more than two embryos. We want a baby. One. And even though transferring so few embryos could decrease our odds of success, we’re willing to take that risk. At least for the first IVF cycle. If things don’t go our way… then I guess we’ll have to weigh the pros and cons of increasing the number of embryos transferred the next time. And, thankfully, Shauntae is totally open to that, too.

But I don’t want to think about that stuff right now. I know I shouldn’t ignore it, I can’t, but just for today I want to be happy. More than that, I want to let Tommy be happy, and excited (as much as he’ll allow himself to be), because seeing him smile, and seeing the light in his eyes as we lie together in bed only serves to multiply every good feeling I already have.

“So…” I sigh contentedly as I roll onto my side to face him, kissing my way from his shoulder to the center of his chest before pausing to look up at him. “Was it worth the wait?”

“The sex or the surrogacy stuff?” He asks, playfully grabbing a fistful of my hair and tugging insistently until we’re nose to nose.

“I was talking about the sex. But both, now that you mention it.”

“Hmm…” After pretending to consider it for a moment, his eyes meet mine and I can see the mischief in them. “The surrogacy stuff, yes. The sex… eh.”

“Eh?”

He shrugs. “It was okay. Not your best work.”

It’s a challenge for me not to take the bait. He wants me to make him pay for that comment, and I will. Just not in the way he’s hoping.

Two can play this game.

His face falls as I shift away from him beneath the sheets, moving to the edge of the mattress and grabbing my jeans from the floor. “Speaking of work, I should probably go do some.”
“Now?”

“My emails aren’t gonna read themselves.”

“We were kinda in the middle of something.” He informs me indignantly as he sits up against the pillows behind him.

I frown at him over my shoulder, but I can only look at him for a few seconds before I have to turn away to avoid laughing at his disgruntled expression. “I thought we were done. I mean… we both got off. Maybe you weren’t as satisfied with the experience as I was, but it can’t always be earth shattering, right?”

“Don’t be such a little bitch! You know I didn’t mean it.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” I reply innocently, pulling a t-shirt over my head and running a hand through my unkempt hair. “Like I said, I have a bunch of stuff to get done.”

He heaves a tired sigh before practically crawling across the bed towards me and wrapping his arms around my waist. So I stand up and step out of his reach.

“Oh, come on! What do you want from me?”

“Nothing.” I kiss him lightly on the lips, but he simply sits there giving me the most unimpressed look he can muster. “You stay here and relax. Not that you really need much rest after such a mediocre sexual encounter, but-”

“It was amazing! Okay?” He exclaims somewhat desperately as I begin walking towards the hall. “Best sex I ever had! You’re a god among men!”

“Is that all you’ve got?” I chide him, coming to a stop in the doorway and leaning against the frame while I wait to see just how badly he wants me to get back in that bed with him. “Not your best work.”
We stare at each other from across the room, neither of us wanting to be the first to give in. I pushed him too far; he was willing to beg before, and now he’s done. Maybe if I pretend to leave he’ll try to stop me… but I don’t really want to leave, and there’s a chance he’ll let me go just to make a point.

He’s so much better at this than I am!

“Fine.” He mumbles dejectedly, and I’m practically holding my breath waiting to see if I won this time.

It has to happen eventually… right?

I watch him as he sinks back down against the pillows, most of his body hidden beneath the sheets. He stretches for a moment before relaxing again, with one arm folded beneath his head, and I can tell from the way he’s looking at me that I’ve lost. I don’t know how yet, but I know it’s coming.

“Go read you stupid emails.” His voice is soft, his tone bereft of hope. “I’ll just stay here in bed…” I notice movement, and my attention automatically focuses on it. The hand that was resting against his chest is creeping slowly down towards the edge of the sheet, and my mouth is suddenly very dry. “All alone…”

As soon as his hand disappears beneath the thin fabric draped across his lower body, I force myself to look away. I don’t know why I’m still trying to resist, it’s not like I have any pride left anyway!

But I really do have a huge backlog of emails to read and reply to, and calls to make, and-

I hear a quiet groan, and like an idiot I look up from the floor and my gaze goes directly to that flawless face of his. He’s still staring right at me, wordlessly taunting me and tempting me. He pulls his lower lip between his teeth as he inhales sharply, then he releases it again along with another needy little noise that makes me want to moan!

He wants me to touch him, and I want me to touch him…

So what the fuck am I still doing standing all the way over here?!
I’ve already shed my t-shirt and unbuttoned my jeans before I make it to the bed, and he looks entirely too pleased with himself as I climb on top of him. I reach under the sheet and grab his wrist, stopping the motion of his hand and causing him to gasp softly in anticipation of what I might do next.

“It may not have been my ‘best work’,” I tell him gruffly. “But that’s still my job.”

His parted lips curl into a cocky smile. “Then why don’t you fucking do it?”

My hand stays tightly wrapped around his wrist, preventing him from touching himself while I battle with my desire to do it for him. Just because he won doesn’t mean his victory should come easy. Pardon the pun. Eventually he gets tired of waiting for me to make a move; I feel his hips thrust to meet his hand. When I pull his hand away entirely, he whines in protest as I hold it against the mattress at his side.

“What’s the matter? Feeling a little unsatisfied?” He glares at me but refuses to answer. “Now, would you say this is more unsatisfying or less unsatisfying than our previous-”

Without warning, he places his one unrestrained hand on the top of my head and shoves me forcefully down until my face is barely an inch from his covered crotch. “How about you shut the fuck up and do something productive with that big mouth of yours?”

“Okay, but then I really do need to go do some actual work so I can make us some money.” I lament unenthusiastically, slowly peeling the sheet down until he’s exposed to me. “‘Cause I don’t know if you know this, but you’re not as cheap as you look.”

“But you are, so maybe you should go find a street corner somewhere and do this for a living instead.”

I wish he wouldn’t look so damn proud of himself while I’m glaring at him the way I am right now. He could at least pretend to be somewhat remorseful, maybe throw out a couple of pathetic pleas for mercy as I make a predatory crawl towards the head of the bed, my body surrounding his, holding him captive. He watches curiously as I slowly push my jeans off of my hips, down to my thighs, then his eyes follow as I reach for the lube on the nightstand. I lean down over him and slowly, sternly instruct him to “turn over”, and of course, he’s practically giddy over my gruff demeanor, which kinda takes some of the fun out of it for me.
Maybe he’d be a little less pleased if I make chick-flick-style-movie love to him instead?

The sound of me flipping open the cap on the bottle of lube is quickly followed up by the sound of both of our names being called out from downstairs. I want to be as frustrated as he is by the inopportune interruption, but watching him scream obscenities into his pillow helps to take the edge off.

“Don’t move, I’ll get rid of them.” I tell him, placing a kiss between his shoulder blades before readjusting my pants and getting off of the bed.

I re-dress on my way out of the room, and by the time I make it downstairs I’m confident that I look mostly presentable. Hopefully not like I was on the verge of having sex thirty seconds ago. I recognized the voice as Jenna’s the second time it called my name, but even though she still lives here and it shouldn’t be that much of a surprise to see her, it kind of is. Before summer break, she was mostly only around to help out with the kids for a couple of hours after school, or for a date night here and there. Now that there’s no homework to assist with, we don’t even see her that often.

“Jenna?”

“Taylor?”

I stop in the middle of the dining room, trying to figure out where her voice is coming from.
“Marco?”

“Polo!” I hear her laugh softly, her voice a little louder than before and coming from the direction of the movie room.

“Hey! Is everything okay?” I ask uncertainly as I meet her in the hallway. “I wasn’t expecting to see you today.”

“I know.” She sighs, seeming somewhat ashamed. “I’m sorry.”

“Why?”
“Because I’m never around anymore.”

I wave her apology off, gesturing for her to follow me into the kitchen. “You don’t have to be sorry for that. We get it; you have a life.”

“Yeah… that’s actually what I wanted to talk to you about.” She admits awkwardly while I begin to make a fresh pot of coffee. “Is now a good time, or should I come back tonight or tomorrow…?”

“Now’s fine.” I assure her, feeling a pang of guilt as I think of Tommy waiting for me upstairs. But I’m much too curious about the reason for Jenna’s impromptu visit to just send her on her way now. “Coffee?”

“Um… sure.” Almost as soon as she has accepted the offer, she looks conflicted. “Actually, no. Thanks.”

“Are you okay?”

“I’m kinda nervous.” She chuckles, her cheeks flushing just enough for me to notice.

“About what? Talking to me?” I ask in confusion, and she nods faintly in reply. “I’m not that scary!”

“No, I don’t mean like that.” She immediately assures me. “I’m not afraid to talk to you. At least… I don’t think I am.”

“Okay…”

“Can we sit?”

Oh.

It’s a sitting thing? Now I’m the one who’s nervous. “Yeah, sure.”
I follow her out onto the terrace just outside of the kitchen, waiting for her to take a seat before I hesitantly lower myself into the one beside it. I don’t know why I’m suddenly so anxious; I can’t think of anything she could tell me that I’d need to be worried about. Unless something is wrong. Maybe she knows something is going on with one of my kids that they haven’t talked to me about? Or maybe something is wrong with her? Maybe she’s sick? Or in trouble? I can’t imagine Jenna getting into trouble, though…

She takes a long, deep breath, and it’s as though I can see her trying to work up the courage to say whatever it is she came here to say to me. Finally, she exhales, and her eyes rise from the tabletop to meet mine.

“T’m pregnant.”

“Oh… uh…”

I swear I had a vocabulary of more than two words just a minute ago. I’m not even sure if ‘uh’ qualifies as a word. It’s more of a sound, really.

“You won’t have to deal with having a baby around all the time; I know that’s the last thing you guys want now that you finally have all five of yours out of diapers.”

You would think. “No, that’s not why I… I’m not worried about that at all. I just… wow.”

“I know.”

“I take it you didn’t plan this?” I ask carefully, not wanting to insult her somehow, and she shakes her head as she looks back down at her hands. “Are you happy about it?”

“Well… at first I was totally freaked out. I was worried I wasn’t ready, and I was afraid that Aaron wasn’t going to want it. But I told him this weekend, and he was so excited. He started talking about us getting an apartment together and getting married…”

“Is that what you want?”
I watch her as she gazes at the glass tabletop, and I assume she must be picturing that apartment with her boyfriend and their baby, because the smile on her face grows wider and wider with every passing second.

“Yeah, it is. I love him, and I already knew that I wanted to spend the rest of my life with him, so… now everything is just going to happen a little faster than we expected.”

“Life does that sometimes.” I acknowledge knowingly. “But I’m glad you’re both happy about it.”

“I feel so bad, though.” She sighs, the smile falling from her lips. “I don’t wanna just up and leave you guys like this.”

“That’s crazy! We never expected that you were going to live with us forever. I mean, ever since Asta started pre-school and you got a full time job, we’ve kinda been preparing for this, you know? You already spend most nights at Aaron’s anyway.”

“It’s just that his place is closer to the school-”

“I’m not complaining.” I assure her, placing my hand over hers in an effort to comfort her. “You should be spending every spare second with the guy you love. I know I do.”

“But you’ve done so much for me.” She protests, her voice wavering with emotion as her tears begin to brim in her eyes. “This wouldn’t be happening if you hadn’t asked me to move out here. I’d still be in Tulsa wishing I was somewhere else. None of the amazing things that have happened to me over the last three years would have happened if it weren’t for you guys.”

“It’s not one-sided. You’ve done a hell of a lot for us, too, Jenna. I honestly don’t know what we would’ve done without you, especially that first year.”

“Which is why I feel so ungrateful just leaving you like this!” She weeps regretfully. “You paid for me to move here, you gave me a job and a place to live. Because of you, I’ve been all over the country, all over the world! I’ve seen places I never thought I’d get to see…. and the whole time, you treated me like I was part of your family-”
“Because you are.” I shift my chair closer to hers, enough that I can lean over and pull her into a hug, and she doesn’t hesitate to return it. “You’re more than just a live-in sitter to us, and you always will be, okay? If you ever need anything, whether it’s help moving your stuff into your new place, or a glowing letter of recommendation, or… even a babysitter so you can have a night off, you know where we are.”

“You don’t have to.”

“I know; I want to.” I insist sincerely, pulling back enough to look her in the eyes so that she will hopefully see that I mean it, and that I’m not even slightly upset at her for any of this. “In fact, I call dibs on getting you guys a stroller.”

“I can’t let you do that!”

“Yes you can, ‘cause I’m not taking no for an answer.”

“Taylor-”

“And don’t go picking out a cheap one, either. Get one with a cup holder, those things are invaluable. And make sure it has lights. Ooh, and get one of the ones that has generators in the wheels so you can charge your phone-”

I don’t get the chance to finish listing off the features of my dream stroller (I didn’t even realize I had a dream stroller), because Jenna almost knocks the air out of my lungs as she wraps her arms around me and hugs me tighter than I think she ever has before.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

Once Jenna’s bomb has been well and truly dropped, and the shock of it has mostly subsided, it’s easier for her to relax and talk about her plans and how she wants to handle everything from here on out. It’s not often that I get to use my history of unplanned, under-prepared parenthood to help anyone else. But there are several points during our conversation where I find myself relating to her hopes and fears, and offering advice on how to handle everything that she and Aaron still have ahead of them. I’m not sure how helpful that advice will actually be in the end, but she seemed to genuinely
appreciate it, and by the time she left, she was much calmer.

I’m not surprised to find Tommy passed out on our bed when I head back upstairs to break the news to him. After not seeing or hearing from him for the entire duration of Jenna’s visit, I figured there was a pretty good chance he’d fallen asleep waiting for me to come back like I’d told him I would. And that’s precisely what appears to have happened; he’s almost exactly how I left him, lying on his stomach, barely covered by a sheet. I can’t bring myself to wake him when he looks more peaceful than he has in weeks, so I carefully pull the sheet up a little further and sneak back out of the room.

I make a very concerted effort to get some work done before the time comes when I’ll have to go and pick the kids up. But every ten minutes or so, my mind drifts from whatever I was doing and I end up sitting in front of my MacBook with my fingers hovering over the keys, just… staring at the wall. Today has been eventful, to say the least, and I think it’s probably going to take me most of the week to process it all. Right now it feels entirely surreal.

Part of me is convinced that I made it all up. We couldn’t possibly have met our surrogate, and we couldn’t possibly like her as much as we do. There must be something wrong with her, there’s some complication lurking just around the corner, waiting to take us from full speed ahead to a mangled wreckage on the side of the road.

But what if there isn’t?

What if everything goes smoothly and she really is as great as she seemed? What if within the next couple of weeks all of the legalities have been figured out, and the paperwork has been taken care of? If all of the searching and talking and contract signing is over by the end of this month, then we can actually start trying to have a baby. And there’s a chance, a chance, that by the end of summer Shauntae could be undergoing her first embryo transfer.

By the end of this year, there could be a baby growing inside her. Our baby.

The end of the year isn’t that far away, in the grand scheme of things. It’s only five and a half months. Which means that, if all goes well, Tommy and I could be parents by next spring!

“You lied to me.” Yawns Tommy as he wanders into the dining room, rubbing his sleepy eyes. “‘Don’t move’, you said. ‘I’ll get rid of them’-”

“I’m sorry.” I apologize sheepishly. “I meant it when I said it.”
“Was it Jenna?” He asks as he drops down heavily into the chair opposite mine. “Sounded like her.”

“Yeah, it was.”

“She’s never usually around during the day anymore.”

“Yeah… well, she kinda had something she needed to talk about.”

He frowns uncertainly, looking a lot more alert than he did just a moment ago. “Everything okay?”

“I think so.” I begin warily, unsure of how he’s going to react to both pieces of news I have to share with him. “She’s moving in with Aaron.”

“Oh. Well… that kinda sucks for us, but it’s not like we didn’t see it coming.”

“That’s what I told her. She felt really bad for leaving.”

He rolls his eyes as he smiles faintly. “Did you tell her how fucking stupid that is?”

“Yes. I used nicer words, but I think she got the message.”

“Good.”

I think this must have been how Jenna felt when she was preparing to tell me that she was pregnant. I only need to say two little words, but I can’t seem to get them out. “There was… something else.”

“What do you mean?”

“The reason she decided to move in with Aaron was because…” Oh boy. Here we go. “She’s
pregnant.”

He stares at me blankly for a moment or two. Blinks once. Twice. And eventually his forehead slowly furrows into a faint frown, like he doesn’t totally understand what he just heard.

“Pregnant?”

“Yeah.”

“So… was she like… trying to have a baby?”

“No.” I tell him gently, almost as though I’ve done something cruel to him that I should feel terribly ashamed of.

Again, he’s silent. But this time he seems less bewildered and more upset. I can see him getting angrier right before my eyes.

“This is bullshit.” He mutters, pushing his chair away from the table and stalking off into the kitchen.

I don’t waste any time following him, and every step of the way I try to think of something to say that will make this less frustrating for him. “I get why you’re upset-”

“Aiyana didn’t plan to get pregnant, either.” He cuts me off irritably. “Did I tell you that?”

“No.”

“It’s so fucking unfair! Neither of them even gave it a fucking thought, it just happened for them. It’s so fucked up!”

“It is.”
“We’ve been dealing with all this surrogacy shit since before Jenna’s baby was even conceived! We were talking about it way before Aiyana got knocked up. But they both have due dates already, and what do we have?”

“We have an egg donor and a surrogate-”

“Maybe.” He argues pessimistically. “We haven’t even asked her yet, let alone put it in writing.”

“I don’t care.” I protest, taking another step closer even when he folds his arms across his chest in a clear attempt at shutting out anything I might do to mollify him. “She’s our surrogate, and we both know it. And we’ll have it in writing soon, and then everything will finally start happening-”

“Or it might all turn to shit.”

“Don’t do this again, Tommy.” I sigh sadly as I reach out to him, my fingers curling around his hand and tugging him towards me. I wasn’t expecting him to move, I thought he’d resist a little longer. But I guess he’s too emotionally wiped out to put up a fight. “We’re so close now.”

He shakes his head sorrowfully before allowing it to fall against my shoulder in defeat. “Not as close as they are.”

“I know.”

“Why does it have to be so fucking hard?”

“Because…” Life sucks sometimes. “We can handle it.”

“That doesn’t even make any sense.” He mumbles, giving me a half-hearted shove in an attempt to push me away.

But I’m not letting go that easy.

“It makes total sense.” I continue undeterred. “Other people have it easier because they can’t handle
all the stuff we can handle. The universe is giving them a break, because it knows that if it threw the same curve balls at them as it throws at us, they’d get hit in the head and fall on their ass. But no matter what gets thrown at us, we knock it right outta the park.”

“What’s with all the baseball metaphors?”

“I don’t know.” I chuckle softly as I cup his face in my hands and draw him into a slow, soothing kiss. I can feel him soften, his bitterness evaporating as he melts into me and lets go of any lingering resentment. “My point is, we can take it. Regardless of whether we should have to, or how unfair it is, we’ll always win in the end.”

“Because we’re such a great team?” He asks mockingly, smirking against my lips.

Maybe I should be offended by the fact that he’s making fun of my very heartfelt efforts to lift his spirits and boost his morale, but I really don’t care. He’s smiling again, and making jokes (even if they are at my expense), and that’s all that matters.

“The best.”

“Well, that’s ‘cause you’re an excellent pitcher.”

Should’ve seen that coming.
I have really fucking bad decision making skills.

I shouldn’t be *allowed* to make decisions, but people keep letting me do it anyway. I’m as bad at making smart decisions as I am at dealing with my own emotions, but at least I can usually spin that as me being good at compartmentalizing or some shit.

But if we’re being honest, I’m just a fucking idiot.

If I wasn’t, I wouldn’t be sitting in a car on I-10, staring at bumper to bumper traffic. I’d be at home watching a movie, or making music, or maybe just enjoying a little peace and quiet before the kids get home from camp for the weekend. But because of my bad decision making skills, I told Alex and Z that we’d be at their show tonight. They gave me an out, and so did Taylor. I could have blown it off; it’s not like it’s the last show they’re ever gonna play. But did I do that?

Fuck no!
Don’t get me wrong, it’s not that I don’t want to go to the show, or spend a night in a hotel with Taylor. Hell, I don’t even really give a shit about the hellish traffic. The thing that’s making me regret my decision to go to Morongo Casino tonight is the very real possibility that I’m gonna have to see Adam. Taylor and I are gonna be hanging out with Phases backstage, so it’s more than likely that we’ll run into him at some point. And even if we don’t, I’m not sure my masochistic side is gonna let me leave after Phases’ set. It’s gonna make me stay and watch Adam perform his new music, with his new band and his new lead guitarist. I’m gonna feel like shit the entire fucking time, but I’ll still stay until the show’s over.

Why?

Because I don’t make good decisions!

I could tell Taylor right now to force me to leave before Adam takes the stage, or to make sure I don’t drink too much and make a complete fucking fool of myself somehow. But my lips don’t part, and the words don’t leave my mouth. I just sit here, mesmerized by the brake lights of the truck in front of us on the freeway, silently rehearsing things I can say to Adam to make me look like I don’t give a shit that he basically fired me four months ago and hasn’t attempted to contact me again since.

Who knows, maybe I won’t even have to speak to him. He might just walk right by me like he’s never seen me before in his life.

I’m not even sure that I wouldn’t prefer that.

How did everything get so fucked up?

I suddenly feel incredibly claustrophobic, so I reach out and crank the air conditioning up as high as it’ll go. As if that’s gonna help.

“You okay?” Taylor asks worriedly, turning the radio down and focusing his attention on me.

I wish this damn traffic would clear the fuck up! Not just so we can go faster than five miles an hour, but because then he’d have to focus more on driving and less on me.
“I’m fine.”

“Is that fine as in ‘okay’, or fine as in ‘fucked up, insecure, neurotic and emotional’?”

I wasn’t expecting anything to bring a smile to my face for the rest of the day. I should’ve known that if anything could kick my lousy mood in the nuts, it’d be him. “The latter.”

“Wanna talk about it?” He nods to the slow moving cars out of the window. “We’ve got time.”

Do I want to talk about it? No.

Would talking about it be the mature, healthy, proactive thing to do? Yes.

So...

“Not really.”

See?

Fucking terrible decision making skills.

And I know it. I’m aware that I just made the wrong choice, and I’m aware that I could very easily backtrack and make the right one. But will I?

Nope.

Instead of pushing the issue, because he knows that’s a sure fire way to make me clam up even more and ruin our little ‘getaway’ entirely, he drops it. He turns the radio back up and starts flipping through various stations, barely pausing to even hear what song is playing before moving on to the next one.
I hate it when he does that.

Suddenly his station hopping comes to an end, landing us on Heart & Soul R&B, which isn’t a station that has ever been played in this car before (not when I’m in it, at least). He listens for a moment, his head slowly starting to bob in time with the music. But then the chorus hits, and he goes from subtle head bobbing to no-holds-barred diva style singing.

“I’m every woman,
It’s all in meeeeee!”

His hands aren’t even on the fucking wheel anymore. Not that the car is moving at all right now, but still! If you’re in the driver’s seat, I’m pretty sure you’re supposed to be driving, not… doing whatever the fuck it is he’s doing. I mean, what is that?!

“I ain’t braggin, ‘cause I’m the one!
You just ask me, ooooh,
It shall be done.”

“What if I ask you to stop? Will that be done?” I ask him mockingly, but he merely shrugs the question off, never breaking his Whitney impersonation for even a second. “People can see you!”

Pointing that out to him was yet another lousy decision on my part. Because rather than feeling mortified like he should, he rolls down his fucking window and turns the radio up louder!

“I’m every woman!
I’m every woman!”

Sure enough, the guy on the fucking Harley one lane over from us turns to look, shaking his head in disapproval of Taylor’s performance. He quickly goes back to pretending we’re not here. Which is a luxury I don’t have, because I almost get smacked in the face by my husband’s exaggerated sweeping arm gestures every five fucking seconds!

“CHAKA KAHN!”
God damnit.

I was doing such a good job of not laughing until now; I really don’t wanna encourage this kind of behavior. But for some reason, hearing him repeatedly yelling “chaka kahn” as the music dies out, regardless of whether or not Whitney is doing it as well, is too much.

“Fuck you.”

He smirks triumphantly, still dancing in his seat until the song has ended entirely. And then ‘All For You’ by Janet Jackson starts, and his face lights up like a kid on Christmas. I swear, sometimes I think it’s shit like this that made me fall in love with him. And at the exact same time, it makes me question how I ever fell in love with him.

I seriously cannot figure it out!

“If you’re gonna impersonate one of the Jackson’s, can you stick with Michael? It’s way hotter.”

“I didn’t realize you had a thing for MJ.” He teases as I turn the music down.

“Ew! I don’t. Not like that!”

That’s another thing I’ve never been able to understand. I consider myself a Michael Jackson fan. I mean, who the fuck in their right mind isn’t? I’ve never been attracted to him or turned on by his voice, though. But sometimes, when Taylor is singing, his voice does this thing that makes him sound eerily like Michael. And even though Michael’s voice never turned me on, that same voice coming out of Taylor?

It does things to me.

I’ve never told him about it, and I don’t intend to. Because I know that asshole will start doing his little MJ trick around me all the damn time just to watch me squirm! It’s bad enough when he does it at shows while I’m in the audience or watching from backstage, and then I’m stuck with a fucking hard on for over an hour. Not that he needs to do the Michael thing at shows in order for me to get it up. Seeing him up there... all breathless and sweaty, moaning into the microphone and dry humping
his fucking piano… damn.

Apparently I don’t even have to see it happening right in front of me for it to get me hot; just thinking about it has done the trick! And, of course, we’re still stuck in this endless fucking traffic jam in the middle of the desert, so there’s nothing I can do about it.

“Are we there yet?”

We get to the hotel just after the official check in time. Which I guess means I should be grateful for the traffic delaying us so we didn’t wind up sitting around in the lobby waiting for our room to be ready.

I was the one who made the hotel reservation, and I distinctly remember booking a suite. Not the best room in the house, but not the worst, either. Something comfortable but not extravagant (which is a nice word for overpriced). But my husband, Mister Money Pants, apparently decided to call the hotel and change the reservation without telling me. So instead of checking in to a modest suite for one night, we’re checking into a fucking private villa for two nights. He thinks it’s cute when he does this kind of thing. And yeah, okay, it is. But I try like hell not to let him know that because, just like with the MJ thing, he’ll do it even more frequently than he already does.

I gotta admit… this upgrade wasn’t the worst idea he’s ever had. A regular hotel room would have been fine, but having our own mini pool right outside of the bedroom isn’t too shabby. And having an ice machine in the room so I don’t have to get dressed and hunt one down in the hotel in the middle of the night? Fucking genius.

Especially here, where there’s a much higher than usual chance of me running into any number of Adam fans if I venture out into any public areas for too long.

Don’t get me wrong, it’s not that I don’t wanna see them. I’m totally open to saying hi, and even taking a picture if I’m asked to. But I don’t wanna deal with the questions I know they’re gonna ask me. And even if they don’t flat out ask me about why I’m not working with Adam anymore, they’re probably going to comment on it in hopes of me answering the question without them having to be brazen enough to pose it.

It didn’t even occur to me until a few days ago that me being seen within five miles of the venue the day of an Adam Lambert concert might set off a rumor explosion on Twitter. I didn’t want anyone spreading it around that I was back in Adam’s band or something, so I took matters into my own hands and tweeted that I was going to “a friends show” at Morongo Casino this weekend. I didn’t bother mentioning that the “friend” I was referring to was Alex. It was a nice, ambiguous statement.
One that wasn’t in any way a lie, and also kept my fans happy by leading them to believe Adam and I are still close enough that I’d go to the effort of traveling outside of L.A. to see him perform.

I wish that was the case.

“So…” I can feel Taylor approaching me from behind while I stand between the open French doors of our villa and stare at the gentle ripples in the pool. It’s like my whole body relaxes before I even feel his arms encircle my waist. “We still have a few hours before we’re supposed to meet Alex at the venue. Any ideas on how we should pass the time?”

I smile in contentment as I tilt my head just enough to give his lips better access to my neck. “A few.”

“Like…?”

“Well, for starters, I want a drink.” I tell him, turning in his arms until we’re face to face. “Then I want you to take your clothes off.”

He pretends to consider it for a moment before nodding. “I think we can arrange that.”

“Then I want you to take my clothes off.”

“Consider it done.”

“Then I want you to fuck me on one of these sun loungers.”

He laughs softly as he glances over my shoulder at the two loungers beside our mini pool, and then at the high wall separating our patio from the main hotel pool area. We can clearly hear the music, as well as the splashing, laughter, and talking of the dozens of guests enjoying the afternoon sun just a few feet away.

“Someone might hear us…” He tells me, his tone suggesting that he’s more excited by the idea than concerned.
“Do you care?”

A grin spreads across his face as he shakes his head, leaning in to kiss me again. “Nope.”

I love this side of him.

I mean, I love every side of him, obviously. But he wasn’t always like this; he couldn’t be. Yeah, we took more than a few risks when we first got together, but it was always impulsive, sometimes even necessary. The danger made everything that little bit more intense, there’s no denying that. But there was always fear lurking in the background, the chance that we would get caught and it would all be over.

Now there’s no real danger. We don’t take risks out of necessity, it’s a choice. But regardless of how intentional it is, it’s still intense, and it’s so fucking hot.

I guess I just love seeing him so free and fearless. It’s breathtaking.

He’s breathtaking.

We wind up skipping the drinks until after we’ve done a little ‘unwinding’ pool side. What can I say? I prioritized. It’s a pretty perfect few hours, and it definitely helps to get my mind off of all of the anxiety I’ve been feeling about tonight.

But once we’ve finally showered, forced ourselves back into clothing, and FaceTimed with the kids to say goodnight, those nerves and negative thoughts come hurtling back into my head. I don’t really want to leave the room. If we hadn’t promised Alex that we’d be at the show, I wouldn’t. The stupid thing is, he’d understand if I skipped it. He tried to talk us out of coming tonight! And I know that Taylor would understand if I wanted to hide out in here all weekend, too. It is an option.

Not attending the concert would be a smart decision, though. And I don’t make those if I can possibly avoid it.

We get stopped by Adam fans a handful of times between the villa and the venue. I recognize most of them; these are not your ‘one show per tour’ breed of fans. Adam’s fans are almost as hardcore as
Taylor’s. I’d probably recognize everyone in the front row at a Hanson show most nights, because chances are they were front row two states away the night before. It’s not a bad thing, necessarily. It just kinda blows my mind. I love music, obviously. I’ve loved it my whole life, there are bands and artists I idolize. But I have never gone to two shows by the same band in two different states in only two nights.

Not unless I was in the band!

Maybe it’s a girl thing?

I gave up on trying to figure it out a long time ago. I just try to appreciate it, whether they’re Adam’s fans, mine, or Taylor’s. Because if they weren’t so overzealous, we wouldn’t have ever had the opportunity to do what we love for a living. I know I don’t owe them anything for the extra attention they pay us, they’re not entitled to anything more than we already give them. But I’m willing to overlook their more intrusive moments most of the time, because in the grand scheme of things, they generally do more good than harm.

Alex is already waiting for us by the main doors of the venue, passes in hand. He makes some comment about how we didn’t have to make ourselves so pretty just for him, and Taylor plays along by asking Alex if he’ll sign his butt cheek later so he can go and get it tattooed on. Normally I would have had a smart ass come back for at least one of those statements, but I’m a little too busy keeping my eyes peeled for Adam, or anyone else in his ‘entourage’ that I might know.

“Been awhile since we were backstage at a casino together.” Taylor remarks in a near whisper against my ear as we follow Alex past a security guard. “Maybe we should see if we can find an empty dressing room later and re-live some old memories?”

Despite how uptight and on edge I was a second ago, I can’t help but smile as I turn my face towards his and accept the kiss he’s waiting to give me. I know he’s probably not even half serious, he’s just trying to distract me and keep me out of my own head. And thankfully it works. At least long enough for us to get to Phases’ dressing room. Once we’re safely shut away inside, it’s a hell of alot easier for me to relax.

“What time did you guys get here?” Asks Jason as Taylor and I take a seat on the couch at the back of the room and watch them all getting ready. “Did you get stuck in that mess on the ten?”

“For like an hour.” Taylor sighs. “But we got here just after three.”
“Lucky!” Exclaims Z enviously, taking a break from applying her eyeliner to turn and look at us. “You must’ve left L.A. before we did. We were stuck in it for almost two hours.”

Alex shakes his head wearily. “We got here over an hour later than we planned. We almost missed soundcheck!”

“We didn’t even get to check into our rooms yet!” Adds Michael, nodding towards a pile of luggage in the corner. “And I’m fucking starving.”

“They said they were gonna bring us something…” Frowns Alex as he glances over his shoulder at the door. “We’ll be eating pizza on stage at this rate.”

“Oh yeah… we missed dinner, too.” I point out to Taylor, who smirks flirtatiously in response. “I totally didn’t even think about it until now.”

“Oh? And what was it you two were doing that was so engrossing that you forgot to eat?” Teases Alex knowingly.

“Leave them alone, perv!” Z orders him with a chuckle, throwing what looks like a tube of mascara at his head. “They’re on vacation, they’re allowed to spend all afternoon fucking if they want.”

“Yeah.” Agrees Jason, throwing a drumstick at him for good measure. “If I had five kids, and I was out of town without them for a night, I wouldn’t even leave my hotel room! In fact…” He looks at us strangely. “Why are you here? Are you insane? We’re a total misuse of your time!”

“Nah.” I wave his comment off unconcernedly. “We fuck all the time. It was nice to have an excuse to make him put some damn clothes on for once.”

Everyone but Taylor cracks up, but I can see that he’s struggling to stop himself from doing the same, even as he tries his hardest to glare at me. “If it’ll make you happy, I’ll stay fully clothed from now until we check out.”

“If you want.” I shrug, feigning indifference.
Luckily, before I can get myself in any more trouble than I’m already in, there’s a knock at the door. The smell of pizza invades the room as soon as Alex reaches over and opens it, and suddenly my stomach feels painfully empty. He places the pizza box and a pile of napkins on the table in the middle of the room before accepting a six pack of beer from whoever it is out in the hall. My main instinct right now is to reach out and grab a slice of pizza and a bottle of beer, not necessarily in that order. But it’s not my dinner, and I’m not the one who has to go on stage soon and exert a whole lot of energy, so I force myself to resist.

I have to sit on my damn hands to do it, though.

“Help yourself.” Jason tells us with a nod towards the pizza. “There’s plenty.”

“Are you sure?” Asks Taylor politely, and I can’t help but chuckle at how eager he sounds despite his noble effort to be well mannered.

I don’t have that problem, and I’ve already got my beer open and taken a bite of my slice of pizza before Taylor makes a move to get something to eat. I’m not even all that big on pizza most of the time, but right now it’s my favorite food in the entire world!

“So, either of you feel like hitting the stage with us for a song or two?” Suggests Michael, causing me to almost choke on my mouthful of beer as I try to emphatically tell him no and swallow at the same time.

“We’re here in a purely spectatorial capacity.” Taylor warns them, pointing an accusing finger at Alex. “If hear so much as a hint of MMMBop, you and me are gonna have issues.”

“How about you, TommyJoe?” Z asks, batting her long eyelashes at me sweetly. “Wanna make some beautiful music with us?”

“No fucking way.”

“Oh, come on! You basically helped us write half the album.”

“I’m not here to perform, I’m here to watch. And drink.” I inform them in no uncertain terms. “I’m not getting up on that stage, I don’t care what you do.”
“Don’t suppose me offering sexual favors would change your mind?” Smiles Alex in his usual self-assured way, even as Jason and Michael throw their discarded beer bottle caps at his head.

“Tempting… but no.”

We only end up hanging out backstage for about half an hour before they really have to get serious and start preparing for the show. On our way out to join the rest of the audience, Taylor playfully pulls me towards the open door of an unlit room. I’m way more tempted to accept his offer of sexual favors than I was with Alex. Even if Alex was probably more serious than Taylor is right now.

“Someone might hear us…” I warn him teasingly as he starts backing into the room.

He raises a skeptical eyebrow at me, still trying to lead me into the darkness behind him. “Do you care?”

“Nope.”

With a playful smirk, he pulls me right up against him and kisses me hungrily. I was barely turned on two seconds ago, and now all I can think about is getting him alone and reenacting our very first dressing room encounter. It’s like I can already feel his mouth on me, and he hasn’t even unzipped my pants yet!

“Tommy?” I hear a once familiar voice ask in surprise.

Wow.

Zero to turned on in two seconds, and then turned on to sub-zero in one.

That can’t be healthy.
If only I hadn’t played slightly-hard-to-get with Taylor a few seconds ago, this might not be happening. We’d be shut away in a dark room, and Adam wouldn’t be able to see me. But it’s too late now; he knows it’s me and there’s nothing I can do to avoid turning around and facing him.

Nothing that won’t make me look immature or insane, anyway.

So, after taking a deep breath, I plaster a smile on my face and force myself to look at him. “Hey.”

“He...” He chuckles awkwardly, uncertainly, which makes it obvious that I was the last person he expected to run into backstage tonight. “How’s it going?”

“Good.” I shrug, doing my best to appear casual and indifferent. It’s pretty fucking hard to do when there’s a voice in my head trying to distract me with tempting suggestions to make a run for it. “You?”
“Yeah… I’m good.” We stare at each other for a moment, and then he suddenly seems to realize that I’m not alone. I didn’t think he could be any more uncomfortable with this situation, but the moment his eyes meet Taylor’s I can see him becoming increasingly uneasy. “Hey, Taylor.”

I gotta admit, when the only response Adam gets from him is a tight smile and a nod of acknowledgement, it’s probably more satisfying that it should be. I wish I was capable of being so cool and stand-offish with him, I should be able to be. But apparently old habits die hard. I don’t know how to just forget half a decade of friendship and act like we barely know each other.

“So… what’re you guys doing here?”

“We’re friends with your opening act.” I tell him, ignoring the immediate pang of guilt I feel for making it sound like I’m not friends with him. It wasn’t what I was implying; I wasn’t implying anything! Fuck. Talking to Adam has never been this difficult for me. Can I just crawl into a hole and die now, please? “We promised them we’d get out to one of their shows before they go on tour.”

“Right.” He smiles, but it looks incredibly fake from where I’m standing. “I haven’t really had chance to talk with them or anything, everyone’s been kinda all over the place. But I caught some of their soundcheck before, they were pretty good.”

“They’re really good.” Taylor quickly counters in a painfully polite tone.

Sassy motherfucker.

Some woman, who has been lingering off to the side looking jittery and impatient the whole time we’ve been talking, suddenly clears her throat. “Adam, you still have to-”

“Right, sorry.” He tells her, sounding more relieved than apologetic. And even though he does his best to make it seem like he’d rather stay and chat, I know him well enough to know that he’s glad to have an excuse to get the hell out of here. “I gotta go… I have a meet and greet, and vocal warm ups, and-”

“Yeah. I remember.”
Well, shit.

‘Yeah’ would have fucking sufficed. But could I leave it at that? No.

“Okay, well… it was great seeing you.”

No, it wasn’t. “You, too. Have a good show.”

“Thanks! I hope you guys enjoy yourselves.” He calls back to us as he follows his fidgety little minder off down the hallway, flashing me one of those fucking huge Adam Lambert grins over his shoulder for good measure.

I need a drink.

“You okay?” Taylor asks sympathetically as soon as Adam is out of earshot.

I’m not really sure how to answer that question, because I’m not really sure how I feel. “I’m not bleeding or anything…”

He offers me a small smile before curling his arm around my shoulders and pulling me closer as we walk towards the doors that lead out to the main floor. “No psychological damage?”

“Nothing a little alcohol won’t cure.”

I can tell that his opinion on what would help make me feel better right now is different from mine, and I can feel him fighting to keep that fact to himself. Because he knows that I am going to drink my sorrows away, regardless of what he thinks about it, and if he pisses me off it’s only going to increase my alcohol consumption and make matters worse.

Unfortunately for me, there’s a much higher concentration of Adam fans in the venue by the time we leave the backstage area. It’s probably total paranoia on my part, but I swear I can feel it every time another pair of eyes turns to me, every time someone whispers my name to the person standing next to them, or points in my direction. It’s not long before one of them takes the plunge and jumps out in front of me, blocking my path to the bar.
Don’t they know how fucking dangerous that is?!

“Hi Tommy!”

Breath, Tommy. Smile and breathe. “Hey.”

“I just wanted to say that I think it’s so cool you came out to support Adam.” She coos at me sweetly, like I’m two years old or something. “I’m glad you guys still hang out, even if you aren’t playing together anymore.”

“Yeah, of course.” I lie casually, feeling like shit for doing it. But what the hell else am I gonna do? It’s not like I can tell the truth, especially not to her.

Not to any of them.

Speaking of ‘them’, I can see more and more fans edging towards us, gathering in some kind of barricade between me and that drink I so badly need. Every second, the barricade shuffles closer, closing in. Every last person is clutching a cell phone, eagerly waiting for their chance to ask to take a selfie with me. I want to excuse myself and tell them I can’t talk right now. But that’ll only make me feel worse, because it’s just one more lie.

Besides, I’ve never really been very good at telling them no.

Taylor makes a few brave attempts at rescuing me. Neither of us is ever afraid to play ‘the bad guy’ with each other’s fans; I guess we figure we’ve got nothing to lose there. But these particular fans haven’t seen me in over a year, and after seeing Adam on ‘Ellen’ without me a few months ago, some of them probably wondered if they would ever run into me at one of his shows (or anywhere else) again. They’re a little more relentless than usual, so whenever Taylor does manage to successfully navigate me away from a huddle of overzealous women, there’s another one waiting for me just a few feet away. Even after Phases takes the stage, and it’s too loud to hold a conversation, people still approach me and wordlessly ask for a picture just by holding up their iPhone and batting their eyelashes at me.

The attention finally starts to wane about halfway through Phases’ set, by which point I’m totally fucking exhausted. And still sober, which was not what I had in mind. It takes me forever to get the attention of the bartender and get a drink, but even once I finally have a beer in my hand and I’m not
being asked to smile for the camera anymore, I’m too distracted to really appreciate the performance I came all the way out into the fucking desert to see. Every couple of minutes I’ll realize that I’m not even watching, I’m just staring in the general direction of the stage. It makes me feel like a shitty friend. All I have to do is take twenty-five minutes out of my self-indulgent moping and fucking focus. And I’m trying, I am... it’s just not happening.

Because I don’t wanna be here.

And now I can’t leave, because there are way too many people in this room who know that I’m here and will notice if I’m not anymore. If I disappear before Adam even starts his show, they’re gonna think it means something.

I guess they’d be right.

I have another round of visitors between Phases’ performance and Adam’s. I’ve been dreading seeing him up on that stage all day, but having to make awkward small talk where I’m forced to be less than honest in order to preserve the reputation of the guy who fired me kinda makes me long for the lights to dim and the music to start.

Until it actually does.

At first I don’t realize that I’m holding my breath. Before, my mind was too busy to take in what was happening right in front of me. But now what’s happening in front of me is the only thing I’m aware of. Then Taylor takes my hand, sliding his fingers between mine and squeezing tightly, and that’s when I remember to exhale.

I can tell almost immediately that everything is… different. That’s a fucking stupid statement, though. Of course it’s different; I’m in the audience now, not in the band. It’s the first time I’ve ever been to an Adam Lambert show and stood in the crowd rather than at his side on the stage. But it’s not just my perspective that makes everything seem foreign. He’s singing a song that I’ve played with him a dozen times before, but I honestly didn’t recognize it right away because he’s not performing it the way we used to. And by the time I’ve figured out which song it is, and my mind has adjusted to this new sound, it changes again. It’s the lyrics that are different this time. He effortlessly slips from a song I knew by heart to one I barely know at all. He altered the old to fit the new.

Apparently that’s kinda his thing nowadays.
Okay, fine, so I’m taking this too personally. I’m bitter and cranky (and still not nearly as drunk as I should be by this point in the evening!). He’s allowed to change things up; all great artists do from time to time. If I was up there with him, I doubt I’d have a problem with it. But I’m not. I’m down here, in the dark, invisible to him.

And sadly not invisible to the person over there who is filming me on their fucking phone, and apparently thinks that I can’t see them doing it.

Fuck my life!

Now I have to act like I’m having a good time, or at least nod my head along to the music or something so that everyone who watches this damn video on Youtube tomorrow will think I’m into it. And I need another drink, but if I go to the bar in the middle of the first song it’s gonna come off like I don’t care enough to pay attention, or like I care more about alcohol than Adam.

Fuck.

Why won’t she put her damn phone away?!

“You okay?” Taylor practically shouts in my ear, but the music is so loud that it doesn’t even sound like he raised his voice.

“Yeah.” I force a small smile, which was a waste of energy because he can see right through it.

“Could you get me another beer?”

I hold up my empty cup, just in case he didn’t hear my request, and he kisses me before heading off towards the bar. As soon as he’s gone, I wish he’d come back. Because now I feel even more exposed than before. I’m standing here, alone, and anyone who looks in this direction can see me, and see how alone I am. At least Taylor blocked some of the view and made me seem less pathetic somehow.

“There you are!” Alex yells cheerfully from about six inches behind me.

Despite the fact that he just scared the living shit out of me, I don’t know that I’ve ever been so happy to see him in the entire fucking time I’ve known him! “Hey!”
“Where’s Tay?”

“Bar.”

He nods, glancing in that direction and then doing a quick sweep of the audience, taking in his surroundings. His eyes eventually settle on me, and even though I’d love to just ignore him, it’s kinda hard to pretend that he’s not staring at me like a fucking creep.

“What?”

“You okay?” He asks worriedly.

I wish people would quit asking me that, then I could quit lying to their faces. “I’m fine.”

He smiles and rolls his eyes at me. “Liar.”

Yup. That’s me.

Taylor finally comes back from the bar with a couple of beers, and when he realizes that we have company he offers to share his drink with Alex. Any other night, I would probably at least offer him a sip or two. But tonight I need every last one of them for myself.

I spend the next twenty minutes studying my replacement. How he plays, how he moves, how he interacts with Adam (or doesn’t, for the most part). He’s kinda just… there. Faceless, almost. He could be anyone. Adam could play another show tomorrow with a totally different guitarist and I doubt most people would notice the change. I guess that’s what he and his new label were going for. This band fades into the background. They do their thing and they do it well, but not one of them could be accused of pulling focus from Adam.

I’m not saying that me and Ashley and Isaac stole the spotlight or anything, not intentionally. He pulled us out into it. For me, it took a while to truly be comfortable there. I put up a good front and tried not to let my nerves show, but for a long time I struggled not to flinch whenever those bright lights hit me. And I know that there are plenty of people out there who resented the attention paid to us. We weren’t the main act, we were the hired help. We were supposed to stand in the shadows and
let Adam shine. Just like those faceless musicians on stage with him tonight.

Maybe that was my mistake.

Maybe if I’d stayed in the shadows and kept my head down, I’d still be up there.

Just as that thought crosses my mind, my cell phone vibrates in the pocket of my jeans. I instinctively take it out, not even looking as I swipe my finger across the screen to open the text I just received. When I force myself to tear my gaze from the stage and see what it says, it’s like being smacked upside the head. And that’s exactly what I needed.

The text is from Lisa, and it’s not a text so much as a picture. It’s Asta and Bridget, snuggled up together on the couch in their Disney footie pajamas, sleeping soundly. They have temporary tattoos on their cheeks, and pieces of popcorn in their messy hair. And even though this is nothing out of the ordinary, it makes me feel extraordinary. It always does.

It’s a reminder of why I don’t even want to be up on that stage tonight, or any other night.

Didn’t I just spend almost a month on the road figuring all this shit out? And then I came here tonight and totally forgot every conclusion I came to, like it never even happened.

Taylor leans in closer to me, peering over my shoulder at the picture on my phone screen. When I look up at him and smile, I can see the hope in his eyes. He doesn’t ask if I’m okay, but it’s written all over his face. And I don’t tell him that I’m fine, but if I did it would be one hundred percent true for the first time all day.

The rest of the show is a lot easier to watch once I stop looking at it as something I lost and start seeing it for what it is. Not that it’s a particularly lengthy set in the end, compared to most of the shows I’ve played with him in the past. I’d been bracing myself for it to last at least an hour and a half, and then just when I’d started to relax, it was over! It’s a relief, though. Not because I was done and ready to get the hell out of here, but because I know Taylor is dying of curiosity over what’s going on in my head right now, and it’d be cruel to keep him in the dark for too long.

Unfortunately for him, Alex and Z aren’t willing to let us head back to our hotel room without having at least one drink with them first. They barely got to see us before the show, and there wasn’t a whole lot of opportunity to chat during Adam’s set. I’m not all that sure we’re going to have much of a chance to talk now, though. Not without being interrupted every few minutes by someone
wanting to tell Alex and Z that they liked their show, or to ask for a picture with one of us.

“Looks like you got yourself a few new fans.” Taylor notes in amusement as we watch yet another giddy girl hurry off to show her friends the selfie she just took with Z.

“And Z may or may not have made at least one girl question her sexuality.” I smirk, sipping on my beer. “Nice work.”

“Thank you.” She giggles and takes a mini bow in her seat. “I try.”

With a proud smile, Alex leans in closer to her and plants an exaggerated kiss on her cheek. “At this point, I think you’ve made more people question their sexuality than Taylor ever did.”

“I wouldn’t go that far.” She argues.

“Yeah, I mean even if she’s made some women look twice, she probably hasn’t made many men reconsider their orientation.” I point out, glancing at Taylor for confirmation. “Unless you have something you’d like to add…?”

He almost chokes on his drink as he tries to suppress a laugh, but once he’s caught his breath he shakes his head adamantly. “Nope, sorry. Still one hundred and ten percent gay.”

“Only one hundred and ten?” Questions Z curiously. “So… I’d only have to knock eleven percent off of that in order for you to be considered one percent straight?”

“I-“

“Challenge accepted.” She declares, raising her martini before turning to Alex and gesturing to her chest. “He hasn’t seen these yet.”

“They’re pretty fucking incredible.” Alex informs us both with a solemn nod of his head. “It’ll change your life, I’m tellin’ ya.”
I’m about to tell him that my boobs are better, but the moment I open my mouth, someone taps me on the shoulder. I turn around to see who it is, and find yet another stranger standing behind me.

“Hi, sorry to bother you.” She begins, her cheeks noticeably becoming a darker shade of pink with every passing second. “I just wanted to say hi.”

“You’re not bothering me.” I assure her sincerely as I slip out of my seat and stand to face her. “And hi.”

She chuckles softly, shyly, her eyes darting from my face to Taylor’s, and then to Alex and Z. “This was the first time I’ve seen Adam live since... he started playing with his new band. It felt really weird that you weren’t up there.”

“It felt weird being in the audience.” I admit with a small smile. “But it’s cool. We’re good, and everything worked out for the best.”

“Are you going to be playing with another band soon?” She asks hopefully. “We all miss seeing you play live.”

Not all. Not by a long shot.

“I don’t really have any plans to play live or anything soon, but if I do I’ll try to like tweet about it ahead of time or something so people know.”

“Great! I would totally come to a show if you were playing. And I’d definitely buy your music if you put it on iTunes! It’s so good.”

“Thanks. That’s really sweet of you. I’m working on some new stuff, but I’m probably just gonna keep it on soundcloud for now, until I figure out what I wanna do with it.”

“Okay, well…” She nibbles on her lip for a moment, struggling to think of something more to say to keep the conversation going a little longer. I hate this part, and I’m too awkward to assist her, so I just stand here like an idiot. “I’m really glad you came to the show. I know a lot of people were hoping you would.”
“I’m glad I came, too. It was good to see everyone again.”

“Um… can I…?” I watch as she takes a step forward and hesitantly begins to open her arms.

I’ve been in this position enough times before to know what she’s looking for, and I don’t hesitate to wrap my arms around her and welcome the hug she’s offering me.

“Thank you, again.” She tells me when I start to pull away. “I hope you have a good night.”

“You, too.”

I watch her back away a little before she reluctantly turns and walks over to her waiting friends. I always feel like there’s something more I should have said or done in these situations, but short of inviting her to join us for a drink (which, if I’m honest, I have been known to do), I had nothing left to offer her. Or any of them, really. I can’t promise them a live performance, or an EP, or an album. I have nothing planned right now.

I’m finally okay with that, but I don’t think they are.

In an effort to avoid any more interruptions, Taylor and I invite Alex and Z back to our mini villa. Alex insists on tracking down a pack of cards first so that we can play some blackjack or poker (because we’re at a casino, after all, and apparently it would be rude not to). So while he and Z head off in search of somewhere to buy or borrow some playing cards, Taylor and I head back to the villa to pick up the clothes we left all over the floor this afternoon and make some more drinks.

The walk from the main casino to our ‘casita’ is a silent one, but I can tell he’s dying to ask me how I’m handling everything that has happened tonight. It’s pretty amusing that he’s trying so hard not to pry, and I’m an asshole for keeping him in suspense until the door is closed behind us. That’s when his patience reaches its limit.

“I have no idea how you’re feeling right now.” He sighs, and I give a slight shrug as I busy myself with toeing my boots off and heading over to the minibar. “I know you weren’t exactly having the time of your life or anything at first, but then you seemed to perk up a bit… and now you’re just… quiet.”

“I’m okay.”
“But are you really okay, or are you just saying that so I won’t worry?” He frowns, walking across the room towards me. “Because if you’re not okay, sooner or later I’m going to figure it out. And then I’m gonna worry anyway, so you may as well just-”

“I’m okay.” I assure him wholeheartedly, and after staring at me skeptically for a moment he slowly starts to accept that it’s the truth. “I wasn’t, but I am now.”

“What changed?”

“Me.” I chuckle, giving another shrug to show that I have no other explanation to offer him. “A long time ago. I just forgot.”

“So… you’re not miserable and wishing you were still in Adam’s band?” He asks cautiously as I take a step closer to him. “Not even a little bit? Deep down in the depths of that black soul of yours?”

Damn, I love him. “Nope, not even in the darkest, dustiest corner.”

“Because it’s okay if you do feel that way. I know you said you were done with touring and everything, but I totally understand if-”

“I know you do.” I cut him off quickly before he can continue wasting his breath. “But I still feel that way. Maybe more after tonight.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I mean… it was a good show and everything, he’s always gonna be an incredible performer no matter who he plays with, you know? But… I don’t wanna play that music. It’s not me. I know now that I could play it, though. And if I needed to, if I needed a job and Adam asked me to come back and play for him again, I would. But I don’t need a job. And… for the first time in months, years, I’m fine with that. I don’t feel bad about it, or like I’m failing somehow. Since we got back from Tulsa I’ve started writing music again, like really writing and recording, not just messing around. And I’m not second guessing it all the way I used to, or telling myself it’s total shit and not worth working on.”
“Good!”

“And I owe a big part of that to you.” I tell him with total sincerity, even as he blushes and shakes his head in disagreement. “It’s true. If you hadn’t given me space to figure stuff out for myself, if you hadn’t been okay with me going on tour last month, and if you hadn’t reminded me on a daily basis that I could do anything I wanted and you would support it as long as it made me happy… I doubt I’d have any fucking clue what I want. And I would be miserable right now, and wishing I was back in Adam’s band, because I wouldn’t know better.”

“All the things you just gave me credit for are things you’ve been doing for me for years. So if you owe me, then I owe you, too.”

I know I can’t possibly win this argument, I’ll just waste precious energy trying. So instead of debating which of us has done more for the other, I decide to settle it with a simple kiss. “Call it even?”

“Deal.” He grins, pulling me up against him and pressing his soft lips to mine.
This weekend had the potential to be a total disaster. I took a huge risk when I called and extended our hotel reservation for an extra night, because there was a very good chance that Tommy wasn’t even going to want to stay for the one night we’d already booked. I was prepared for him to want to pack up and leave right after Adam’s show. And if that was what he felt he needed to do, I would have done it without question.

Luckily, that wasn’t how it played out. It was looking more and more likely as the evening progressed, but he somehow pulled himself out of that spiral of self-doubt and melancholy. I won’t say that he was completely okay for the rest of the weekend, because there’s no denying that his mind was still preoccupied. But it didn’t seem to be his career or his current relationship (or lack thereof) with Adam that was occupying his thoughts.

I’m pretty sure he was thinking about how different his life is now compared to how used to be. Before he worked for Adam, before he met me in that bar, before everything we are, everything we have, and the future we’re working towards. It happens to me as well sometimes. When I think of who I was before he came into my life, and who I am now, this person that I might never have become if it wasn’t for him…
It definitely gives me more than a momentary pause, that’s for sure.

And I’m sure that wasn’t the only thing on his mind; having a baby is never far from either of our thoughts. Shauntae and Sam are bringing their daughter over for a little ‘meet the family’ dinner with our kids tonight. We keep telling ourselves that it’s just going to be a relaxed, no-pressure evening (Tommy wouldn’t even let me make anything more complex than spaghetti!). But no matter what we tell ourselves, we know it is possibly one of the most important dinners we’ll ever have. We’re almost certain we want to ask Shauntae to be our surrogate, and we’re just as certain that she’ll agree to it if we do. But this dinner could change that. We’ll be outside of the structure of the surrogacy offices and the interview etiquette. This isn’t about finding out if we’re all on the same page as far as what our expectations are and how we want to handle any possible problems that might arise. It’s about finding out who they are, and vice versa. Deciding if this is the woman we want to entrust with carrying our child. Deciding if we want her, and her wife and kid, in our lives indefinitely.

This time tomorrow, we’ll either be calling Alyssa to have paperwork drawn up, and making doctor’s appointments... or we’ll be starting our search all over again.

But right now, I just want to savor our last few moments of “alone time”. The odds that we’ll have the excuse or the opportunity to take another weekend getaway again this year are slim-to-none. Ike and Zac fly in tomorrow, and then it’s two weeks of solid studio work to get the album finished in time for tour. After tour comes Thanksgiving, and Christmas, and New Years... and who the hell knows what next year has in store for us.

So even though we’re sitting in a car on the freeway, until we pull into our driveway and I turn the engine off, this still counts as part of our vacation in my mind.

And I’m not letting go of his hand.

“You still wanna tell the kids that Shauntae and Sam are just old friends of mine?” He asks as I take our exit off of highway 101. “I feel kinda bad lying to them.”

“Me, too. It just seems like the truth would be too much, at least for right now. If we do end up asking Shauntae to be our surrogate, then we can tell them everything. But if they know who she is before hand, it’ll be weird for everyone. They won’t be able to look at her like they would any other person we have over for dinner, you know? They’ll be wondering if she’s the woman who’s going to be pregnant with their little brother or sister.”
“And we’re not going to be wondering that?” He teases semi-seriously.

“I’m gonna try like hell not to.” I smirk, casting a glance at him before turning onto Beachwood Drive. “I want to get to know her as a person, not an incubator.”

Apparently he finds that statement so amusing that the iced Starbucks coffee he’s sipping almost comes out of his nose. After taking a moment to set his drink in a cup holder and stop himself from choking, he looks at me with a playful gleam in his eyes.

“I’ll give you head whenever and wherever you want it for a week if you say that to her face tonight.”

“Make it a month and you’ve got a deal.” I counter.

“You drive a hard bargain, Hanson...”

“Pun intended?”

“Duh.” He chuckles softly, picking his drink back up and slurping on it again.

Between the sight of him with his lips wrapped around a straw, and our previous conversation about him giving me copious amounts of head, I’m too distracted to pay attention to driving, and I end up running right through a four way stop.

Thank god the cops never seem to be around to see me do shit like that.

“I’m sorry, officer. I didn’t see the stop sign because I was imagining my husband sucking on something other than a Starbucks straw.” Probably wouldn’t get me a whole lot of sympathy.

All too soon, I’m making that last turn along the winding curves of Durand, and our mailbox is in sight. He squeezes my hand just as I’m about the squeeze his, and I smile to myself at the knowledge that he’s no more ready for the past forty-eight hours to be over than I am. But almost the second I pull into the driveway beside Lisa’s car, the front door opens and we’re greeted by five elated faces. Ezra is the only one of them who doesn’t immediately rush over to the car before I’ve even had a
chance to come to a full stop. It’s obvious he’s happy we’re home, but at twelve and three quarters, he’s a little too old to be jumping up and down on either side of the car like an over excited Minion.

Suddenly I don’t feel so bad about our weekend being over. It’s hard to feel anything but loved when you’re welcomed home with so much enthusiasm.

“Why you gotta keep leaving all the time?” Complains Asta, practically trying to climb Tommy’s leg until he relents and reaches down to pick her up. “You never stay here no more.”

“I’m here now, aren’t I?”

“Dad, when do Uncle Zac and Uncle Ike get here?” River asks, pulling insistently on my arm all the way over to the house, as though he’s trying to get my attention (even though he already has it). “Will they be here for dinner?”

“No, buddy. They won’t be here until tomorrow.”

“For breakfast, then?” Viggo quickly chimes in. “Can we make them pancakes and eggs?”

“They won’t be here that early. But they might come over for dinner tomorrow night, if they’re not too tired.”

I doubt either of them heard the end of that sentence, they were already too busy cheering and high fiving each other. They rarely hear the “if” parts of any “mights” and “maybes” I give them.

“Hey, guys.” Lisa greets us warmly as we step into the foyer, and I wait for all the kids to join us before I close the door. “How was your trip?”

“Good.” Nods Tommy, setting Asta down on the ground so that she can run off and play with Bridget for a few more minutes before they’re forced to part ways.

“What did you do?” Asks Penny curiously.
“We went to see Alex and Z play a show, remember?”

“For two whole days?” She questions with her most skeptical eyebrow raise. “Didn’t you do anything else?”

Nothing I wanna tell my ten year old daughter about, that’s for damn sure.

“Oh… well…”

“We played some of the games in the casino.” Tommy answers easily when he notices me struggling to think of anything PG to share with them.

No, we didn’t. Not even once.

“Did you have a really awesome hotel room?” Inquires Viggo. “With a giant bed and a huge TV?”

“The TV was normal sized.” I tell him, unable to keep myself from laughing as his faces falls in disappointment. “But you know what? We didn’t watch TV because we were too busy enjoying our own private swimming pool!”

“You had your own pool?” Gasps Penny in wide-eyed awe. “That no one else could swim in?”

“We couldn’t even swim in it.” Tommy explains with a small smile. “It wasn’t really a swimming pool, it was more like a giant bathtub in the ground.”

“But you had fun?” Lisa asks hopefully.

“Yeah, definitely.”

“Thank you so much for babysitting, and dog-sitting, and house-sitting…”
She waves my gratitude off, just like she always does. If it had been Tommy thanking her, though, she would be reminding him how much he owes her right about now. “What are sisters for?”

“Bugging you.” Ezra replies under his breath, barely able to conceal a smile when his eyes meet mine.

“Preach!” Agrees Tommy, offering him a hand to high five in solidarity.

“You’re welcome.” Lisa scowls at her brother, swatting his arm in retaliation. “Don’t worry, I won’t be around to ‘bug’ you much longer.”

“Oh boy, here we go.”

“I’ll just go and find my husband, who is only slightly exhausted from taking care of your five kids as well as his own daughter all weekend, and we’ll be out of your hair.”

“Thanks, that’d be great.” He grins back at her way too smugly, earning himself another slap. Only this one is to the back of the head, and it sets the kids off into fits of giggles. “Hey!”

“Let that be a lesson to you.” She tells him sternly before turning to our snickering children. “Treat your siblings with respect, or they’ll make you suffer!”

“You sound like mom.” He mutters.

“Is that supposed to be an insult?”

I can tell that Tommy is probably about to say something else he doesn’t really mean, so I reach out and clamp my hand down over his mouth before he has a chance to get himself in even more trouble.

“It’s a compliment.” I assure her. “You and your mom are both wonderful, strong, intelligent-” Despite the fact that my hand is still covering his mouth and preventing him from speaking, I can clearly hear (and feel) the “suck up” Tommy coughs into my palm. “Incredibly patient women, and I only hope I can put up with this idiot for as long as the two of you have.”
I can. Easily.

Gladly.

But he doesn’t deserve to hear that right now, because he’s being a brat to his sister.

“Thanks, Taylor. It’s nice to have a mature, thoughtful brother-in-law to make up for the blood related dud I got stuck with.”

“Happy to help.” I smile back at her warmly just as Tommy finally manages to pry my fingers away from his lips.

“How can they get a room?” Frowns Viggo. “You can’t ‘get’ a room, you can only go to your room.”

“You’re right, kiddo. Tommy has terrible grammar.”

“And on that note, I think we’ll be going.” Lisa laughs softly. “I have to go grocery shopping. Mom’s coming over for dinner and I have nothing to feed her.”

“Tell her it’s potluck.” Suggests Tommy with a nonchalant shrug. “Let her bring the food.”

“See, stuff like this is why I’m her favorite.”

“I can live with that.”

Sometimes I have a harder time getting Tommy and Lisa to stop teasing each other than I do with any of our kids. But I guess my siblings and I treat each other same same way, especially me, Ike and Zac. It’s one of the reasons I’m most excited to have them out here, as stupid as that might sound. I
spent my whole life bickering with them on a daily basis about completely unimportant stuff, they could be so irritating. But once that was behind me, and there was a thousand miles between us, I missed it. Bickering with Tommy isn’t the same. It’s more fun, no question, and it’s great for working up a little sexual tension, but it’s a different kind of release.

Taunting Ike and making him so crazy that his voice gets all high pitched when he’s telling me off… I don’t know, it just makes my day feel more complete somehow.

Once Lisa, David and Bridget have said their goodbyes, and I’ve thanked them again enough for both Tommy and myself, we take the kids and Duke out for a walk in the hills so that we can spend some quality time with them away from the distractions of toys and electronics. And it might also be in an attempt to tire them out a little so that they’re less likely to be over-excited and crazy when we have unsuspecting strangers over for dinner. They’re usually pretty well behaved when we have company, to be fair, but like most kids they seem to feel the need to impress new people in their lives with how loud and inappropriate they can be. I really don’t want them scaring away our surrogate by making her think she’d be doing humanity a disservice by allowing us to raise another child.

Sadly, my plan kinda backfires a little because Asta is the first to start whining about being tired long before any of her siblings run out of energy. So Tommy and I take turns giving her piggyback rides for the next hour, and as a result we’re the only ones needing a nap by the time we finally make it home. I was disappointed earlier that I wasn’t going to have a chance to do any real cooking for dinner tonight, but now I’m glad that all I have to do is boil some water and heat up some frozen meatballs!

Shauntae, Sam and Stella show up right on time, and Tommy has the door open almost as soon as they ring the doorbell (because he was pacing in front of it). By the time the kids and I make it to the foyer, the three of them are already inside and handing Tommy their jackets. Stella is practically hiding behind Sam, peering out shyly at all of the new people before her. And of course Penny is the first to attempt to interact with her, even if it is simply by waving to her from across the room.

“You didn’t have any trouble finding us, did you?” I ask as Shauntae gently tries to coax her daughter out into the open. “It’s a bit of a maze up here.”

“We found you just fine, but it was definitely an adventure!” She chuckles. “These streets are pretty pokey!”

“Right?” Commiserates Tommy with a sympathetic sigh. “I love this house and everything, but the Hollywood Hills are a freakin’ mess.”
“The view makes up for it, though.” I remind him as I curl my arm around his waist and give him a gentle squeeze.

“I bet.” Sam shakes her head in awe as she takes in her surroundings. “I laughed when Stella said you lived in a castle when we pulled into the driveway, but she’s not wrong!”

“It’s not a castle!” Giggles Asta. “It’s just my house.”

“Your house is a very big house.” Shauntae smiles at her. “Compared to our little shack, at least.”

“It’s funny how small a house can feel when you have five kids climbing the walls.” Smirks Tommy as he glances down at our suspiciously innocent looking children.

“We don’t climb the walls.” River frowns at him. “We’re not even supposed to climb on the furniture!”

But they do.

“Guys, these are our friend’s, Sam and Shauntae. And that’s their daughter, Stella.” I tell them, noting the fact that Stella is slowly but surely inching her way out from behind Sam.

“Say hi, Stella.” She urges her gently, stroking her long blonde curls soothingly.

Stella’s eyes dart back and forth from one face to the next, finally settling on Penny. And then she blushes and averts her eyes to the ground before murmuring an incredibly quiet “hi”.

“And this is Ezra, Penny, River, Viggo, and Asta.” Tommy introduces our kids, and they each smile and wave at the sound of their name.

“It’s nice to meet you all.” Nods Shauntae, looking a little overwhelmed. “Please don’t hold it against us if we get your names mixed up at first.”

“We won’t.” Ezra assures her. “Lots of people get our names wrong when they meet us for the first
time. We’re used to it.”

“Well, dinner should be ready in ten minutes or so, but…” I place a hand in the center of Penny’s back and give her an encouraging nudge forward. “Maybe you guys could take Stella into the family room and show her some of your toys?”

“You wanna come see?” Asks Penny as she holds her hand out towards Stella, who only recoils further at the gesture. “Your mommies can come, too.”

Stella wordlessly gazes up at Shauntae and Sam with the same helpless puppy dog eyes that tend to get Penny and Asta anything they want. It takes all of five seconds for her to win Sam over. “Come on. Let’s go see what they’ve got!”

“I’ve got blocks and puzzles!” Asta informs them proudly, grabbing Stella’s hand as soon as it’s within reach. And either Stella is too stunned to stop her, or she’s not really as shy as she’s making herself out to be, because I don’t see her so much as flinch.

“I should probably…” Begins Tommy, already making a move to follow.

“Keep them from being eaten alive?” I smile knowingly as I peck him quickly on the lips before he’s too far out of reach. “Yeah, probably.”

“Is there anything I can do to help out with dinner?” Shauntae offers. “I promise not to completely take over. I’m pretty good at taking orders when it’s someone else’s kitchen.”

“Right, I forgot that you’re a chef.” I chuckle softly, leading her through the dining room and into the kitchen. “Now I really wish I’d made more of an effort.”

“Don’t be silly! You don’t have to go to any trouble for us.”

“I kinda like going to trouble, though. I make a point of doing it as often as possible.”

“So you’re one of those people, huh?” She asks teasingly as I open the oven door and retrieve two loaves of garlic bread before they have chance to burn.
“Those people?”

“You know the ones I’m talking about. The people who put themselves through unnecessary stress over everything, like they don’t know how to not be stressed out.”

Yes, I do know those people. I’m their King. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Right.”

“So what restaurant do you work at? Anywhere I might have heard of?”

“Maybe.” She blushes faintly, leaning against the kitchen counter beside me and watching me stir the simmering marinara sauce on the stove. “It’s called Angelini Osteria. It’s an Italian place in-”

“Fairfax!” I finish for her in astonishment. “Holy crap! That place is so good!”

“I’m glad you think so.”

“My best friend lives a couple of blocks away, and we’ve eaten there dozens of times. I mean, that pasta dish with the lobster? Oh my god. And the mushroom risotto? I could eat that stuff all day!”

“Well, I can’t take credit for those, sadly. I’m the pastry chef, so I only deal with desserts.”

“Does that mean you’re responsible for that pie with the pine nuts?”

“The Torta della Nonna?” She laughs softly in amusement. “Yes.”

“And the mascarpone ice cream with the strawberries and red wine?”
“Guilty.”

“I think I might be a little bit in love with you right now.” I admit semi-seriously. “In a purely non-sexual, completely food related way. If that’s even a thing.”

“If it’s not a thing, it should be a thing.” She agrees wholeheartedly. “And I’m flattered, thank you.”

“Damn.”

“What?”

I heave a distressed sigh as I turn off the stove and stare down at the spaghetti in the pot in front of me. “I can’t let you eat this.”

“Are you serious?!”

“You work at an actual Italian restaurant. Like a really good one. And I’m gonna serve you pasta from a box and marinara sauce from a jar? I can’t do it.”

“I love pasta from a box and marinara sauce from a jar!” She insists in an effort to remove the pathetic pout from my face. “I had soup out of a can for lunch; I’m not a food snob, I promise.”

“Really?”

“Cross my heart. And I’m sure you have excellent taste in jarred marinara sauce.”

“Well. it is organic.” I mumble as I dunk the spoon in and out of the sauce for no real reason.

“That’s better than what I serve at my house.”

“Hey!” We both look towards the sound of Tommy’s voice as he sticks his head in from the dining
room. “How long ‘til dinner? The kids are getting hangry.”

“It’s done, I just need to serve it.”

“What’s up with you?” He asks in concern when he notices the forlorn look on my face. “Is something wrong?”

“He’s worried I won’t approve of his cooking.” Shauntae informs him before I have the chance to lie.

“Oh jeez.” Groans Tommy with a distinct note of dread in his tone, and a roll of his eyes so noticeable that it could probably be seen from space. “If you don’t knock it off, you’re never inviting anyone over for dinner again.”

“It’s your fault! You wouldn’t let me make something special!”

“Even if you’d made the most elaborate five course meal you could come up with, you’d still be in here pulling this crap, because you do it every time we have people over for a meal.”

“Do not.” I mutter petulantly while Shauntae giggles away beside me.

“You guys are the cutest little old married couple I’ve ever met.”

“Hey!” Tommy scowls indignantly. “I’m not old!”

“And I’m younger than him, so if he’s not old, I’m definitely not old!”

“You’re only like a year and a half younger.” He grumbles as he turns to leave the room. “It’s not like I’m a cougay or anything.”

And just like that, my bad mood has lifted. “He doesn’t know it yet, but ‘cougay’ just became his new pet name.”
Dinner goes more than smoothly. There are no awkward pauses in conversation… in fact, there are no pauses of any kind in conversation. No one struggles to think of things to say, the kids are on their best behavior, and nothing gets spilled, or dropped, or broken. It’s like some kind of miracle, honestly! It’s rare that we get through an entire meal without some form of mess being made. But aside from the spaghetti sauce all over Asta’s face and fingers, we seem to come out of the experience unscathed.

Stella was already coming out of her shell before we sat down to eat, and by the time the last of the food has been consumed she’s feeling right at home. She’s the first to ask if she can leave the table with Asta and Penny so that they can go and play. And Ezra is kind enough to volunteer to make sure that his younger sibling’s hands are marinara sauce free before they’re set loose in the family room to wipe them all over the couch.

I may be wrong, but I have a sneaking suspicion that he knows Shauntae and Sam aren’t “old friends”, and that this dinner is more important to us than we’ve been letting on.

“Your kids are great.” Sam tells us once we’re alone, accepting a refill of her glass of wine from Tommy. “You’re gonna have to teach us everything you know about parenting so we can make sure ours turns out like yours.”

“Stella seems pretty great already, so I don’t think you need any help from us.” Chuckles Tommy. “Besides, I have no idea what the hell I’m doing. I make it up as I go. And most of the hard work was done before I came along.”

“Now that’s not even slightly true.” I argue immediately and wholeheartedly. “Except maybe the making it up as you go part, because I think all parents do that. I know I always have.”

“Whatever it is you guys are doing, you’re doing it well.” Shauntae adamantly maintains.

“Thanks. It’s kind of important to us that you guys think that, for obvious reasons.”

Tommy snorts softly in amusement as he takes a sip of his drink. “That was subtle.”

“It wasn’t supposed to be.” I retort, giving him a playful nudge with my elbow and almost causing him to spill wine down his shirt.
“Does that mean this is your not-so-subtle way of asking if we… well, I will be your surrogate?” Asks Shauntae, instinctively reaching for Sam’s hand on the table between them.

It almost makes me laugh to see how hopeful she is that we’ll choose her, when we’re sitting here hoping that she’ll say yes when we ask. I don’t even have to pull Tommy aside and confirm that this is what we both want; the little looks he’s been shooting me all evening told me everything I need to know. And if they hadn’t, the way his hand is clutching my thigh nervously beneath the table right now is a pretty clear sign.

“Well, we were gonna wait until the end of the evening, but… that would mean we wouldn’t have chance to celebrate with you, so…”

“So…?”

I turn to Tommy for a moment, offering him a questioning shrug. “You wanna do it, or should I?”

“Damnit, Taylor, would you just ask her already?!” He exclaims impatiently, leaving both Sam and Shauntae fighting back laughter.

“Okay.” Taking a deep breath, I turn my attention back to Shauntae, watching as she nibbles her lower lip in anticipation. “Shauntae, we would be really honored if you would agree to-”

“Yes!” Her hand immediately flies to her mouth, her eyes wide with surprise at her own outburst. “Sorry! You finish, I’ll be appropriately quiet now.”

“I don’t think there’s anything else to say.” I laugh softly, following Tommy’s example by getting out of my seat and making my way around to her side of the table.

She doesn’t hesitate to accept the hugs that we’re both ready and more than willing to offer her, and Sam. And the second we’re done thanking them and telling them how much this means to us, our arms are wrapped around each other and Tommy is holding on to me so tightly that I can barely breathe. He doesn’t say a word, but he doesn’t need to.

I know he’s been waiting for this moment for months, we both have, and neither of us can believe
it’s actually, finally, here.
This week has been *insanely* busy. Usually when I’m busy with work, I can still catch my breath at home. But there’s stuff going on in my personal life *and* my professional life right now, so there’s really no getting away from it. Especially not when they’re both happening under the same roof. It’s hard to leave work at the office (or studio, in my case) when all that separates my work life from my home life is a flight of stairs!

And I *love* it.

I thrive on this kind of chaos. Even if I complain about it from time to time, or wish for a break, I don’t actually mean it. Whenever I do get a break, I don’t know what to do with myself. Besides, all of this week’s craziness has been of the positive variety, and I can never get enough of feeling like everything in my life is going the way I want it to. Everything is good, everyone is happy.

Except Ike. But that’s only because he can’t stand it when I stay unrelentingly calm and level headed while he’s having one of his pessimistic meltdowns. I can’t help it, though! There are a lot of things I do to purposely piss him off, but staying cool while things are blowing up all around me isn’t one of them. It’s just how I’ve always handled things when it comes to making music; *I have* to believe it’s all going to come together in the end, no matter how impossible that might seem while we’re in the midst of trying to make it happen.

If only I could figure out how to take the same approach to personal problems.
Not that I have any right now. In fact, this week has been one of the best we’ve had in a long while. After dinner with Shauntae and Sam on Sunday, the surrogacy ball started well and truly rolling. We called Alyssa first thing Monday morning to tell her the good news and ask her to get all of the legal paperwork drawn up for us, and she gave us the numbers for a couple of fertility clinics in the area so that we could set up appointments for Tommy and Shauntae. She said that if everything goes well, we could be dotting I’s and crossing T’s before the end of the month, and Shauntae and our egg donor (who thankfully hasn’t given up on us and decided to work with someone else yet) could start syncing their cycles within the next few weeks!

I know we’re still at the starting line, or maybe we haven’t even made it that far, yet. But it’s like I can see where we’re going now. Even if the finish line isn’t in sight, at least we’re not on that winding road of uncertainty anymore. That road had way too many sharp twists and turns, potholes, and potential dead ends. But this one is like a straight shot to our destination. And I know there might still be obstacles along the way, but if we’re patient we can make it through whatever comes at us. We can get there.

I might have to keep reminding Tommy about that pesky patience thing, though.

“Hey, you know how you’re going out with Alex and Zac tonight?” He asks me as I exit the bathroom to find him reclined on the bed.

“Yeah?”

“How about you don’t?”

I frown uncertainly, grabbing a clean shirt from the closet before turning to face him. “I thought you said you didn’t mind watching the kids while I went out for a couple of hours?”

“I don’t.”

“Okay… so why don’t you want me to go out?” I chuckle in bemusement as he gets off of the bed and starts to approach me. I know that look he’s giving me, and if backing up a little wouldn’t put me in the closet, I’d do it.

“I do. But I want you to go out with me.” He informs me, taking the shirt out of my hands and holding it behind his back.
“But we don’t have anyone to watch the kids.”

“Ask Ike.”

My first few attempts to take my shirt away from him fail miserably, so I turn back to the closet in search of a new one. “I doubt he’ll be all that eager to help. He just spent all day in the studio, and he probably already settled in for the night at the hotel.”

“Well… then… how about we just stay here. We can set the kids up with a movie or something…” He suggests innocently, slowly trailing one fingertip down the length of my spine. So I quickly put my new shirt on to cover myself up. “Ez is good at keeping River and Viggo in line, and Asta will probably pass out in like half an hour anyway.”

“No.”

His hopeful little expression morphs into a pitiful pout immediately. “Why?”

“Because I know what you wanna do while they’re watching a movie, and it’s not happening.”

“But-”

“One more day, Tommy. That’s it, that’s all you have to suffer through.”

“Fine, so I won’t get off! That doesn’t mean I can’t get you off!” He pleads with me as he curls his fingers in the front of my shirt and pulls me closer. “Come on… please ?”

“No! I know you, and I know that’s not all you’re gonna want once we get started.”

“I’ll be good! I promise!”

“No, you won’t. I’m not gonna risk it when you only have to wait another twenty-four hours.” His only response this time is to whine at me. Like an actual sad-puppy whine! “You’re being ridiculous! How’re you gonna feel if we fool around and it goes too far?”
“Satisfied!”

“You know what I mean. There’s a reason you’re not supposed to have sex or jerk off for a few days before-”

“No one has to know!”

“The nurse at the clinic said you should abstain for three days, so you’re damn well gonna abstain for three days.”

Mumbling several expletives to himself, he flops backwards onto the bed and runs his hands through his hair in frustration. It’s not like I enjoy telling him no. He’s acting like I’m doing this for my own amusement or something, but that couldn’t be further from the truth! I mean… okay, it is kinda funny. But if he thinks I’ve preferred spending quality time with my hand instead of him for the last couple of days, he’s an idiot.

There’s a reason I’m paying Jenna to take the kids out to dinner and a movie tomorrow night, and it’s not so that Tommy and I can stay home alone and snuggle!

It’s hard to just up and leave when I know how frustrated he is, I feel like a jerk as I kiss him goodbye and try not to glance over my shoulder one last time before the front door closes behind me. But I know that if I give him that one last look, it might just break my resolve. Instead, I try to focus on the night ahead because I’ve been looking forward to it all week. It’s rare that Zac is in Los Angeles when Alex isn’t out on tour or too busy to get away for a few hours. The three of us only get to hang out like this once or twice a year, and we always have so much fun when we do. It never fails to make me feel ten years younger.

Tommy generally chooses to sit these little reunions out, even if we have a babysitter on hand and he’s free to join us. He and Zac get along okay now, for the most part. They’ll take cheap shots at each other, but they both do the same thing with Alex. I think it’s just a little too weird for Tommy to have drinks with the only other guys I’ve ever slept with besides him, which is totally understandable. If I think about it too much, it’s kinda weird for me, too. Which is why I try not to think about it; I focus on what we are rather than what we were.

Zac is already at the bar when I arrive, but Alex has yet to show up. It’s still pretty early, and being a weeknight it’s unlikely things are going to pick up much beyond the few small gatherings scattered throughout the room. Which is kind of perfect, to be honest. As accustomed to audiences as the three
of us may be, we try to keep things low key when we spend the evening busting out karaoke classics like ‘I Love Rock ‘N’ Roll’ or ‘Sweet Home Alabama’. Zac doesn’t have much to worry about, since he doesn’t drink. He’s not at risk of having one too many shots of tequila and massacring ‘Baby Got Back’ on a dare.

Not that I’ve ever done that.

But I’ve seen plenty of people make questionable song selections after a night of drinking. Like the time Alex got up and sang ‘The Real Slim Shady’ when he could barely walk in a straight line. I never would have let him do it if I’d seen it coming. But one minute he was excusing himself to go to the restroom, and the next minute he was up on the stage saying “may I have your attention please?” As bad of a friend as it probably makes me, I’ll admit that it was pretty entertaining. But that’s because I wasn’t the one who ended up on Youtube the next day. Thankfully, the only videos of me doing karaoke that are floating around out there are incredibly brief and much less embarrassing!

“Hey, stranger.” I smirk as I take a seat beside Zac at the table he picked out for us. “Long time, no see.”

“Longest three hours of my life.” He drones insincerely, pushing a bottle of beer across the tabletop towards me.

“Thanks.”

“Welcome.”

“When did you get here?”

With a noncommittal shrug, he slumps in his seat a little. “About ten minutes ago. I figured I’d walk, since it’s not far from the hotel. Guess I over-estimated how long it’d take me to get here.”

“Sorry. I would’ve been here on time, but I... had a little trouble getting away.”

“One of the kids kicking up a fuss?” He asks, offering me a knowing smile.
“Yeah…” Let’s go with that. “So, did you have time to pick out your first song while you were waiting?”

“I don’t know. I think I’m gonna go with something by Def Leppard, at least to start with. I might venture into Poison territory later...”

“I figured.” I chuckle softly, taking a sip of my beer. “Just don’t go wailing yourself hoarse; you need to save your voice for the studio.”

“Hey, if I can wail on tour night after night and still be able to sing a twenty-something song setlist, I think I can handle a little karaoke.”

He’s right. And I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t envious. Not that my vocal chords aren’t resilient, but his are freaking super human! We’ve often joked with our fans that Zac could probably join a hair metal band if we ever decided to take a break from performing and recording together, but it’s not a joke. I mean it kind of is, because he probably wouldn’t do it, but he could.

“Hey!’ Alex greets us cheerfully as he drops down into the only vacant chair at the table. “Sorry I’m a little late.”

Zac and I make eye contact for a split second, but a split second is long enough for us to know what the other is thinking. It’s a skill we’ve had since we were little kids. We can plot and scheme in total silence, and communicate with a look so brief that most of the time no one else will even see it.

“Dude, you could’ve texted or something.” I sigh in disapproval. “We were starting to think you weren’t coming.”

“We got here like half an hour ago.”

“Why?!” Exclaims Alex incredulously, looking back and forth between the two of us as though we’re insane. “We said eight-thirty.”

“No, we said eight.” Zac insists with an entirely straight face.
“Seriously? Fuck, I’m sorry, I must’ve misheard—”

“We’re messin’ with you.” I assure him as I place a comforting hand on his arm. “I only just got here, and he hasn’t been here for more than fifteen minutes.”

“Assholes.” He mutters, snatching the beer out of my hand and taking a long sip. “Just for that, I get to pick the first song you perform.”

Shit.

I’m definitely gonna need another drink.

It’s funny how I can blast Whitney out of my car window on the freeway and sing like no one’s listening, but when Alex wants me to get up and give my best rendition of Beyonce’s ‘If I Were A Boy’, I want to throw myself off of that little stage and break a bone just to get out of doing it. I guess that goes to show how much more humiliation I’m willing to endure if the result is bringing a smile to Tommy’s face.

Speaking of Tommy, he spends most of the night texting me. I wouldn’t go so far as to label it “sexting”, but I can tell he’s trying to get me at least a little worked up so that when I get home later, and I’m tipsy and tired, I’ll be more likely to give in to his pleading. I’m kinda tempted to ask Alex if I can crash on his couch, because I’m not sure how many more times I can turn Tommy down.

Refusing to have sex with him when he’s begging me to give in is by far my least favorite activity in the world ever!

“Who’re you texting?” Alex asks with feigned curiosity. He already knows who it is that keeps messaging me, that’s why he’s smiling at me like that. “Is it your hubby?”

“Maybe.”

“Tell him to leave you the fuck alone!” He demands semi-seriously. “If he wanted to talk to you this badly, he shoulda just come with you.”
“You know he won’t.” I mumble, instinctively glancing up at Zac as he takes the stage while my thumbs fervently type a reply to Tommy’s latest message. “It’s too weird for him.”

“It’s only as weird as he makes it.”

“How would you feel if you had to hang out with two of Z’s ex’s?”

He shrugs. “I do it all the time. We’ve all been friends since we were kids, so it’s kind of unavoidable.”

“Well, maybe one day he’ll be as enlightened as you are. But right now he’s bored, and lonely, and—”

“Horny? Yeah, I figured that part out like twenty texts ago.”

“How?!” I ask in surprise as Zac begins to sing the opening lines of ‘Tearin’ Down The Walls’. “Can you see my phone screen?”

“Yes. I used my x-ray vision to read your texts through the back of your phone.” He replies sarcastically. “Also, every time your phone buzzes, you react like someone grabbed your junk.” I want to argue with that statement, my mouth is open and I’m all set to tell him he’s wrong. But he’s not. “You should be ashamed of yourself, sexting in a public place. It’s disgusting!”

“I’m not sexting!”

“Ohh huh. Sure.”

“I’m not!” I protest adamantly. “You wanna see?”

“Hell yeah!” He grins, already reaching out to take my phone.

“Well you can’t. But I swear I haven’t said anything to him that could be considered even slightly flirtatious.”
His excited expression fades into one of confusion, and possibly even concern. “Why? Did he do something to piss you off?”

“No, it’s nothing like that...”

But how am I supposed to explain what’s going on to Alex when he has no idea that we’re trying to have a baby? I want to tell him so badly, but I can’t without asking Tommy first. And I don’t particularly want to ask him over text, because I won’t be able to tell how he really feels about it if I can’t see his face.

“Is everything alright? You seem kinda distracted tonight.”

“I’m fine.”

“You’d tell me if something was going on, right? I know I’ve been busy with tour rehearsals and shit, but-”

“You’d be one of the first to know.” I tell him wholeheartedly. “I promise.”

“But not the first?” He frowns indignantly. “Who gets first dibs? Don’t say Tommy, he doesn’t count.”

“You know, you’re way more needy and insecure than I bet most people think you are.”

“Is it Zac?”

“You want another drink?” I ask as I get out of my seat, and he immediately jumps up and begins following me towards the bar. “I’m thinking it’s tequila time.”

“It’s Zac, isn’t it?”

The rest of the evening passes pretty much as I expected. Lots of drinking, singing, and laughing, which is a perfect combination in my opinion. The only thing that could make the night even better
would be having hot, midnight sex with my husband. Since that’s not an option, I’m grateful to find him already asleep when my Uber ride drops me off at home. Usually I’d wake him up (for the aforementioned sex), but tonight I try my best to get into bed so carefully that he doesn’t even stir.

His appointment at the clinic is pretty early in the morning. Early enough that I have to handle the summer camp and pre-school run alone so that he can get there on time. I knew he was going to be nervous today, no matter how cool he’s been acting all week. I also knew that he was going to regret being too lazy to go by the clinic and pick up a sample cup so that he could take care of that part in the privacy of his own home. It was “no big deal” and he “wasn’t bothered” by the idea of having to jerk off in a stark little room with nothing but crappy porn mags for company.

Not until he actually had to do it, and then suddenly it was a big deal and he was very bothered.

I don’t envy him one bit. I feel bad that I didn’t go to the clinic with him for moral support, but he said there was no point in me wasting any of the time I was supposed to be spending in the studio with Ike and Zac. Only I am wasting it. Because even though I’m sitting here, and I’m vaguely aware of what’s going on around me, my mind is mostly preoccupied with Tommy. His appointment was fifteen minutes ago. I don’t know what to expect as far as… duration. If they were running on time, there’s a chance he might even be done already. I know he had to have a blood test as well, but those don’t take more than a couple of minutes.

Maybe I should text him and see how it’s going?

But he might be “busy”. I don’t want to break his concentration. I’m guessing it’s challenging enough to do what he’s doing without being interrupted.

“Taylor?”

“Huh?” I shake my head dazedly, pulling my gaze from my blank phone screen to the face of my annoyed older brother. “Sorry. What did you say?”

“I just asked which of the bass tracks you preferred.”

Oh. “Uh… can I hear them again?”

“Seriously? Where the hell are you today, man?”
“Chill out, Ike.” Zac interjects from over on the couch, never looking up from his sketch pad. “Everyone spaces out sometimes, even you.”

“Not when I have a deadline.” Argues Ike with a weary sigh. “Okay, let’s give them one more listen. Try to stay awake this time.”

He restarts the first track and I do my utmost to focus all of my attention on it. But barely ten seconds into it, my phone starts vibrating in my hand. If it was anyone but Tommy, I’d decline the call to avoid pissing Ike off any further. There’s a thin line between it being funny when he’s annoyed at me, and my day sucking because he’s annoyed at me. And I’m teetering precariously on that line right now.

But it’s Tommy.

“I’m sorry, I have to take this.” I tell him in my most apologetic tone, practically grovelling for forgiveness as I back towards the studio door. “I’ll be right back, I swear.”

As soon as the door is closed behind me, I accept the call and raise the phone to my ear. I don’t even have chance to say anything before I hear Tommy’s anxious voice.

“I can’t do it!”

“What?”

“I’ve been in here for like ten minutes and nothing is happening!” He tells me in an almost panicked whisper. “All they have is some shitty retro gay porn on VHS, or straight porn mags. The guys in this thing have way too much body hair, and apparently I don’t like boobs as much as I used to.”

“You could watch some less hairy gay porn on your phone.” I suggest, trying to sound helpful and not even slightly amused. “Or you could just use your imagination.”

“I tried.” He insists hopelessly. “The videos took forever to load. They kept stopping and starting ‘cause the cell reception in here is shit. I bet they block it on purpose to make this whole experience even worse! And I tried just closing my eyes and thinking about you, but people keep walking by
right outside the door and it’s kinda hard to relax.”

“Aw, poor baby.” Damn. I didn’t mean to say that out loud! And I didn’t mean to giggle, either. “I’m sorry it’s so hard.” He scoffs at my choice of words. “I mean difficult.”

“You have to help me.”

“Me?” I squeak in surprise. “How? You want me to come down there and-”

“You gotta have phone sex with me.” He urges me desperately. “Please?”

“I…” After glancing over my shoulder at the studio door, I take a paranoid step further away from it. Rationally, I know the room is sound proof and my brothers can’t hear me. But I feel weird having this conversation with them one room away. “I can’t! Ike is about ready to break my neck. He’s gonna come looking for me any minute, and I really don’t want him to find me with my dick in my hand!”

“Fine, keep it in your pants. But the least you can do is fake it!”

“Fake what? Having my dick in my hand?” I frown uncertainly, taking several more steps away from the studio.

“For fucks sake, just make some sex noises!” He commands impatiently. “Don’t tell me you can’t. If you want us to have this baby, you’re gonna need to fucking participate!”

Fighting hard to suppress more laughter, I quickly make my way upstairs and shut myself away in the movie room. It’s the only other sound proof room in the house, so I figure that if one of my brothers does come looking for me, at least they won’t be able to find me by following the sound of my sex noises.

“Okay… are you sitting comfortably?” I tease him, earning myself a muttered “fuck you” in response. “Just… take a breath, and close your eyes.” I listen as he inhales deeply before exhaling a slow, unsteady breath. The sound of it causes the hairs on the back of my neck to instantly stand on end, and a shiver to run down my spine. But no matter how tempting it is, I really can’t let myself give in. “Do you need me to work up to it or should I just-”
“Just... start moaning or whatever.”

This should be relatively easy for me. It’s not complicated; I was just moaning in the recording studio less than an hour ago. For entirely different reasons, obviously, but still… those sounds come out of me even when I don’t mean for them to!

So why is it that I don’t know how to do it when I actually want to?

“Taylor?”

“Yeah, I’m here. I’m… working on it.”

It’s like I can hear him roll his eyes. “Just take a breath and close your eyes.”

“Very funny.”

“I’m not kidding.”

I guess it’s worth a shot.

Just as he did a moment ago, I close my eyes and take a long, deep breath to try and relax a little. It takes me a few seconds of flipping through images in my mind before I can decide on one to use for ‘inspiration’, but I finally settle on a memory of yesterday evening. Of the two of us in our bedroom, and him stealing my shirt and begging me to let him get me off. Instead of turning him down, I kiss him. I give in to him, just like I wanted to.

Suddenly my spine isn’t the only part of my body experiencing a tingling sensation, and without hesitation my lips part and I hear myself breathe a soft whimper into my phone.

Tommy’s breath hitches on the other end of the line, and it makes my heart beat quicken. I turn my attention back to the picture of us in my head, imagining him trailing his fingertips across my shoulders, along the protrusion of my collarbone, and then grazing his short nails down the bare skin
of my chest. He pushes me down onto the bed, and I swear I can hear the sound of him unzipping my jeans, I can feel him tugging them roughly down over my thighs.

My legs shake a little. Not just in this fantasy I’ve concocted, but in reality! So I sink down onto the nearest recliner, gripping my phone in one hand and the plush leather armrest in the other.

“What’re you thinking about?” He asks, his voice noticeably less steady than it was.

“You… going down on me.” I admit, squeezing the armrest in a desperate attempt to keep my hand from wandering when he groans softly. “Last night, in our room…”

“Shoulda let me…”

“I wanted to…” I moan, imagining his lips grazing my thigh as he crawls his way onto the bed. “Fuck, I wanted to.”

The thought of it causes my hips to buck, grinding my erection against the unyielding fabric of my jeans. The friction is simultaneously satisfying and frustrating.

It’s not enough.

“I love the way you taste.” Oh god. “I think I’m addicted… have been since the first time… remember?”

“I remember.” I nod, running my tongue over my dry lips as the images in my head shift from last night all the way back to the first night we ever spent together. “I remember how it felt when you touched me… like I couldn’t breathe… like I was afraid to move in case you stopped…” I tell him, my voice sounding weak and helpless, even to me. Which is appropriate, because that’s exactly how I feel right now, and how I felt that night. “I never wanted you to stop.”

He moans, his breathing coming much faster now than before and becoming a little more erratic with every exhale. “You… fuck, you were so goddamn beautiful when you came… couldn’t take my eyes off you…”

“I felt that way watching you lick the come off of my stomach…”
This time when he moans it’s a little louder than before, which means that the effect it has on me is stronger. I release my painfully sharp grip on the arm of the chair and hastily unbutton and unzip my pants. I swear he must’ve heard it somehow, because he gasps, murmuring my name as I slip my hand into my underwear and wrap my fingers around my erection.

What is this self-control thing you speak of?

Never heard of it.

The next twenty seconds are a frantic rush of sounds and sensations. His breathing and mine, building and blurring together until it’s impossible to distinguish between the two. The way he moans my name… it’s as though he’s *pleading* with me, like he believes I have something he needs and I’m refusing to give it to him, but nothing could be further from the truth.

I’d give him anything.

“Tommy…”

Apparently that was all he wanted from me, because as soon as his name passes my lips I hear him hopelessly trying to stifle himself as he comes. And that’s all it takes to push me over the edge.

It always has been.

“Fuck.” He chuckles breathlessly as I try to calm myself down. “Almost missed the cup.”

“Oh shit, I totally forgot about that part.”

“Me too, until the last minute.” He admits as his amusement dies out. “I hope I got enough in…”

“I love it when you talk dirty to me.”
“Shut up! You’re not the one who has to go hand a cup of jizz to a total stranger and then walk through a waiting room full of people who know you just jerked off.”

“You’re right, I’m sorry.” I sympathize as genuinely as I can. “I promise I’ll make it up to you tonight.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah.”

If Ike doesn’t kill or castrate me first...
My brothers and I have officially hit the halfway point of our almost two week re-recording stint, and things are slowly but surely starting to fall into place and sound the way that we’ve wanted them to from day one. I’m not surprised, or even relieved; I knew we’d get here if we kept at it. It’s usually at about this point when things come together and the stress begins to die down a little. And knowing that, is probably one of the main reasons I’m able to stay calm and focused when it feels like we’re making zero progress. Even when there’s a voice in my head whispering to me that we’ll never get it done on time, that everything sucks and we should scrap it all and start over, that everyone is going to hate it when we finally do release it to the general public, I can usually tell that voice to shut the fuck up.

I have years of prior experience to back up my optimism.

So does Ike, but for some reason he seems way more susceptible to that nagging doubt than Zac or I ever have been. We can push through the most hopeless recording sessions, when everything sounds shit and nothing is working, we’ll keep going until something goes right. But Ike has always had trouble in that area. He’ll still stick it out with us until the bitter end, but only if we drag him along and ignore his grouching.

It’s worth it when we get to this part, though. When things start to click, and that cloud over his head dissipates. I can and will work with my big brother when he’s being a pouty, pessimistic baby. But we have way more fun together, and therefore write much better music, when he’s in the kind of
mood he’s been in today.

“Okay, that last take was good.” I tell him through the mic as he and Zac watch me from the control room. “I think the end felt better than it has before now.”

“Dude, you were totally fucking on. You were right about that high note, it completely changed the feel of it.” Ike assures me enthusiastically. Zac, on the other hand, can’t bring himself to stop chowing down on his lunch long enough to contribute to the conversation verbally. So he simply gives me a thumbs up. “I think we got it, unless you wanted to try something else?”

“Nah, I’m pretty happy with that one. But I do wanna give the bridge in ‘No Rest For The Weary’ another shot.”

“I thought you said that one wasn’t gonna get any better.” Zac interjects through a mouthful of sandwich.

“Yeah, but I’m on a roll.” I grin proudly, adjusting the headphones that are covering my ears. “Ten bucks says I can take it from a nine to an eleven.”

“I’m not gonna bet against you.” Chuckles Ike as he turns his attention back to the computer in front of him.

But Zac pulls a ten dollar bill out of his wallet and waves it around over Ike’s head, smugly mouthing “bring it” at me.

It’s so on.

I’m in the middle of making an obscene gesture at him when I notice the door open in the background, and Tommy steps into the room with them. He has his phone to his ear, and he doesn’t speak to Ike or Zac as he leans over the mixing console and pushes the button to turn the talkback on.

“Hey, sorry to interrupt.”
“You’re not.” I smile cheerfully. Even when my day is already going well, it’s always better when I get to see him. “What’s up?”

“My mom wants to know if we can have dinner at her place tonight?”

“Sure, I don’t see why not.”

“Well, she kinda wants it to be adults only.” He elaborates, and the anxiety I can hear in his voice makes me want to ditch my headphones and head into the control room so that we can talk face to face. Even if his face is unreadable. “I doubt Jenna is free two nights in a row on short notice, and Lisa’s coming to dinner, so…”

I lock eyes with Zac and smile sweetly. “If only there was someone else we could ask. Someone the kids love spending time with, someone with nothing better to do…”

“You don’t know that I don’t have better stuff to do!” He argues. “I might be going to a concert, or I might have pre-booked movie tickets, or maybe I’m getting together with a friend-”

“Are you?”

“No. But I resent you implying that I’m not.”

“So how ‘bout it, Uncle Zac? Wanna spend the evening with your five favorite nieces and nephews?”

“Hey!” Protests Ike semi-seriously. “What makes you think he likes your kids better than mine? He sees my kids way more than yours.”

“Exactly. The novelty has probably worn off.” I tease him.

“Are we going or not?” Tommy impatiently interrupts our bickering.

“Uh… yeah.” Zac tells him somewhat awkwardly. “I can hang out here with the kids for a few
“Thanks.” He mumbles, releasing the button on the talkback and leaving the room without another word.

I take back what I said about my day getting better just because I saw him. I think the opposite just happened.

He wasn’t this cranky when I came down here this morning. In fact, we were both still on a high from getting to spend last night alone, making up for three days of having to keep our hands off of each other. Something is obviously bothering him, and I feel like I should go and find him so that I can drag whatever it is out of him. But I promised Ike he would have my full attention today. Besides, when Tommy gets in moods like this, it’s hard to get him to talk until he’s ready. Trying to pry the truth out of him right now might be a waste of time, and could potentially make things worse.

So I guess I’m just going to have to give him some time to cool off, and try my best not to spend the rest of the afternoon worrying about what got into him.

I don’t see that last part going too well for me.

I send him a few texts over the course of the day, and hopefully the fact that they don’t go unanswered means he’s not mad at me. The answers I get are never more than a word or two, but if I had done something to cause his bad mood, he wouldn’t have replied at all. Knowing that it’s not my fault he’s having a bad day isn’t that much of a consolation, though. He’s still miserable either way.

Maybe the kids are giving him hell. It happens, to both of us, but this week he’s been handling a lot of stuff by himself because I’ve been so busy in the studio. He swore up and down that he was okay with it, that he could handle it. And I know that he can handle it; he’s handled way worse. Besides, when I hit the road in a couple of months, he’s going to be doing everything around here by himself.

I hate that thought, but there’s nothing I can do about it. We need to get back out on the road to promote the new record. We haven’t toured since last summer, and waiting until next summer isn’t ideal. I can’t (or rather, won’t) pull the kids out of school just so we can all go together, and it wouldn’t be fair to them to have my parents come out here and stay with them while Tommy and I head off without them. We’ve known this was coming for months now, and we still have a couple of months to prepare… I just wish things could be different somehow.
Why is it too much to ask to have everything go my way all the time?

When we finally finish recording for the day, Ike heads back to his hotel to make his Skype date with Nikki, and Zac settles in with the kids in the family room while I search for my husband. I find him hiding out on the kitchen terrace with Duke. Well, I guess it’s not fair to call it “hiding” just because it took me longer than usual to locate him. But given his behavior over the past few hours, it doesn’t seem like it would be a stretch to assume he was hoping to go unnoticed out here. Poor Duke is having a very unsatisfying tug of war with him; Tommy is holding on to Duke’s rope toy but putting very little effort into fighting him for it. He’s not even looking at Duke, he’s staring out at the hazy evening skyline, which is why he doesn’t notice me join him on the terrace.

“What time do we have to be at your mom’s?” I ask quietly as I take a seat beside him, and I noticed him flinch a little when he realizes he has company.

“Seven.”

“We should probably leave soon, then.”

“Sure.”

I feel as though I should call Dia and warn her about what she’s going to have to contend with tonight. But since she’s his mom, I’m sure this is nothing she hasn’t faced before. It’s definitely not his worst mood ever.

“What’s going on? You’ve seemed… off today.”

“How would you know?” He asks, not necessarily to be argumentative, but probably not out of genuine curiosity either. “You haven’t seen me all day.”

“I saw you in the studio before, and it was pretty obvious you were in a crumby mood. Your texts have been succinct, and now you’re-”

“I’m fine.” He sighs tiredly. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to be a jerk. I don’t know what the fuck’s wrong with me.”
“Were the kids a handful?” I press gently, laying my hand lightly on his arm and feeling it tense beneath my touch.

“They were fine, no worse than usual.”

“Well… do you remember when you started feeling… whatever it is you’re feeling?”

“I just… I dunno. I don’t wanna go to dinner.” He mumbles. “I have this weird feeling.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s stupid… forget it.” I watch in confusion as he lets go of Duke’s rope toy and gets out of his seat. Before he can turn to head back into the house, I reach out and take him by the wrist, forcing him to stop and face me again. “There was just…. something about her voice on the phone. It’s like it triggered something for me, but I don’t know what or why. I just know it totally fucking spooked me, and now I’m dreading tonight.”

“You think she asked us to dinner because she has something bad to tell us?”

“Why else would she invite us over for dinner without any notice and ask us to leave the kids at home?” He shrugs hopelessly, and the fearful look in his eyes makes my heart ache. “Whatever. We said we’d go, so let’s just… get it over with.”

It’s hard to know how to help him. He doesn’t want to go to dinner, but there’s nothing I can do to get us out of it. Aside from calling Dia and lying to her, which I refuse to do. Besides, if he’s right and she has something important to tell us, skipping dinner isn’t going to prevent whatever it is from happening or being true. I could try to convince him that nothing is wrong, and that he’s overreacting, but I don’t know that for sure. And if I succeed in calming his nerves, and then it turns out that I’m wrong, whatever it is will just hit him even harder.

Right now I can’t even convince myself that everything is fine, because he’s right about it being weird for Dia to invite us over with no notice. And it’s not every day that the tone of someone’s voice has this effect on Tommy. Honestly… I can’t even remember the last time I saw him like this. He gets worried and anxious sometimes, we both do, but this is something else. Like he said, he was spooked.
Triggered.

But by what?

I offer to drive us over to Burbank, because he’s clearly not up to the task. We probably wouldn’t make it there alive with him behind the wheel. Lisa and David are already there when we arrive, which is normal. I’m less than punctual, and Tommy is less than concerned with whether or not we get where we’re going on time, so we’re late about ninety-nine times out of one hundred. Maybe ninety-nine-point-nine.

If it was left up to Tommy to ring the doorbell, we’d be standing on the front stoop all night. Again it’s up to me to keep things moving, and when David answers the door I get the feeling he’s having to take the lead with Lisa, too. We exchange small smiles as we step into the house and he closes the door quietly behind us, but none of us says anything. I want to, because I can tell that this silence is doing diddly to put Tommy at ease, but I can’t figure out what to say.

Small talk somehow seems as though it would be worse than no talk at all.

Lisa is waiting for us in the living room, although she’s oblivious to our presence as we walk into the room because she’s too busy staring into the glass of water in her hands. It’s so… un-Lisa like. Usually she’d be greeting us with a smile, maybe even a hug. She and Tommy would likely start teasing each other like children until Dia put a stop to it. Except that Dia is nowhere to be seen. David clears his throat to get his wife’s attention, and she slowly looks up from her drink. When she sees us she attempts to smile, but it looks just as forced as David’s did when he opened the door.

“What the fuck’s going on?” Tommy asks under his breath, taking a seat in the armchair opposite Lisa and David. “Has she told you why she wanted us to come over?”

Lisa shakes her head faintly, glancing in the direction of the kitchen. “I feel like she’s hiding in there or something. She let us in and offered us something to drink, and then she just disappeared.”

“She’s probably just finishing up cooking dinner.” David tells her reassuringly, and not at all convincingly. “She’ll be through in a minute.”

“I don’t like this.” She sighs. “I’ve been telling you for weeks that something’s off with her.”
“She has seemed a little out of it.” He concedes. “But that doesn’t mean something’s wrong—”

“No, something’s wrong.” Insists Tommy uneasily.

“I wish she’d just get out here and tell us. I can’t sit through an entire dinner not knowing!”

“I think I’d kinda prefer to not know for as long as fucking possible.” He mumbles as I perch on the arm of his chair, placing a comforting hand on his shoulder.

I feel him lean into my touch, just a little, and it helps to know that I’m capable of doing something to relieve even a fraction of the stress he’s feeling. My fingers knead the tight muscles around the base of his neck, and he breathes in and out slowly in an attempt to relax. But just as I feel him beginning to loosen up beneath my touch, Dia walks into the room and suddenly his shoulder muscles are rock hard again.

“Oh, you’re here!” She exclaims in surprise. “I didn’t hear the doorbell.”

“We rang it very quietly.” I joke with a smile, noting the grateful expression on her face. I’m guessing I’m the only one who has put any effort into pretending everything is normal. “We’ve only been here a minute or two, you didn’t miss anything.”

“Can I get you a drink? Water? Or I have some red wine?”

Tommy shakes his head, which I’ll admit is a surprise. I would’ve thought he’d jump at the chance to get some alcohol in his system right now. “I’m good.”

“I’ll take a glass of wine, if the bottle is already open.”

“Don’t be silly.” She waves my remark off dismissively as she turns to leave the room again. “It has to be opened sometime.”

“Mom, wait.” Lisa calls out to Dia before she can retreat to the kitchen. “When are you gonna tell us why we’re here.”
“You’re here for dinner.”

“Mom…”

“Just… let me get Taylor his drink and then we can talk, okay?”

Fuck. I should’ve said ‘no, thank you’. Now I’m delaying this even longer and making Lisa and Tommy feel even worse.

And I don’t even really want a glass of wine, I was just being polite!

If all Dia is doing in there is pouring me a drink, it’s the slowest pour the world has ever known. Even if you factor in uncorking the bottle and getting a glass out. Hell, even if there were no clean glasses and she had to wash and dry one just for me, which is highly unlikely, it takes her way longer than it should. And every second that passes only serves to make the silence in the room feel that much heavier.

Lisa stands up, presumably to go after her mom and find out what the hell is taking so long, but Dia returns before she even gets halfway to the door.

“Can I get you something, honey?” Asks Dia hopefully. “Do you need more water-”

“You can sit down and talk to us, that’s what you can do for me.” Lisa tells her firmly, guiding her over to the only empty armchair in the room and gesturing for her to take a seat. “We’re all worried, and we need to know what’s going on.”

With a resigned sigh, Dia does as she’s told and settles herself on the chair, folding her hands in her lap and focusing her gaze unswervingly on her wedding ring. “I’m sorry I worried you.”

“Is there something we should be worried about?” David questions carefully. “Is everything okay?”
“I wish I could tell you it was, but…” She shakes her head sadly as she raises her eyes to meet his. Her mouth fights to form a hint of a smile, but her lips are trembling and it makes it impossible. “I have some bad news.”

My hand immediately seeks out Tommy’s, and the second my fingertips brush his skin he grabs ahold of me and squeezes so tightly that it genuinely hurts. But I know whatever he’s feeling is worse, and I’m sickeningly sure that whatever Dia is about to tell us is going to cause him more pain. So even if he breaks my damn fingers, I still won’t be in as much agony as he is.

“A couple of months ago, I noticed that I was feeling like maybe I’d gained some weight. I know it sounds silly, but it bothered me.” Her eyes shift from David’s face to Lisa’s, and once again she tries for a smile. “You know what it’s like. Your favorite dress starts to feel a little tighter, and it’s the end of the world. So I tried to be ‘good’ for a few weeks, skipping dessert, cutting back on wine, going for more walks… But that bloated feeling didn’t go away, even though I lost a little weight. Then I started having some pain—”

“Where?” Lisa cuts her off anxiously. “What kind of pain?”

“In my back, sometimes. Mostly in my stomach, though. Or… abdomen is the more accurate term, I suppose.”

“Did you go to a doctor?” Asks Tommy.

“Not at first. I thought that maybe it was something I was eating, and one of the women I worked with said that it sounded like I might be gluten intolerant. So I tried cutting that out of my diet for a few weeks, and nothing changed.”

“Then did you go see a doctor?”

“A few weeks ago, yes.” She nods, taking a moment and a very deep breath before forcing herself to look at us all again. “She did an exam, and… Oh, I don’t know how to say this…”

Out of the corner of my eye, I notice Lisa raise her hand to cover her mouth, stifling a soft sound of distress. Dia hasn’t even said the words yet, but it’s obvious that whatever those words are, they’re going to break her children. Which is exactly why she’s finding it so difficult to say to them.
The thought that this moment reminds me of having to sit my kids down and tell them that their mother had died crosses my mind, and it turns my stomach to think that this could be anything like that.

“She ordered an ultrasound, because she was concerned about the abdominal pain. And the ultrasound didn’t look good, so she sent me in for a CT scan earlier this week. They found a large mass in my ovary, a tumor, and what they think are very likely more tumors throughout my abdomen.” Tommy’s grip on my hand becomes so intense that I have to clench my jaw to stop myself from making any involuntary sounds of discomfort. Not that anyone would have heard me over Lisa’s sobbing. “They were able to biopsy the mass while I was there for the scan…” Continues Dia, her voice wavering more noticeably by the second as she watches her daughter break down. It’s obvious she would rather stop talking and take Lisa in her arms. But if she doesn’t get through this now, who knows when she’ll feel capable of telling us the whole story again. “The results came back yesterday and… it’s cancer.”

Tommy’s hand releases its hold on mine almost instantly. The second the word ‘cancer’ leaves her mouth, his hand goes limp and drops onto his thigh like someone just tied a one-hundred-and-fifty pound anchor to his wrist.

“Fuck…”

“I’m so sorry, Dia…” I tell her. And Tommy. And Lisa. It sounds pathetic, and meaningless, but I don’t know what else to say! “Is there anything we can… I mean… do you know what happens next?”

“They want to remove the tumor. Or… tumors. It depends what they find during the surgery. They’ll know more once they can actually see it. And then I’ll need to have chemotherapy. A lot of it, from what I understand. I’m not exactly looking forward to it, but if it’s what I need to do to beat this…”

“So… you’re gonna be okay?” Tommy asks apprehensively, clearly not sure whether the answer will be what he’s hoping for. “They said you’ll be okay?”

“They said… I have a chance.”

“Like what kind of a chance, though?”
“Tommy!” Lisa chastises through her tears, fighting to catch her breath as she wipes her eyes on the tissue David just handed her. “How can you ask that?”

“What the hell else am I supposed to ask?”

“How about ‘when is the surgery’?” She snaps. “Or ‘is there anything you need’?”

“It’s okay.” Insists Dia gently, getting out of her chair and making her way over to where Lisa is sitting on the couch. David moves aside to make room for her to sit down, and she’s barely done so before Lisa has her wrapped in what looks like a suffocating hug. “I’m okay, sweetheart.”

“No, you’re not.”

“But I will be. I’m determined to be okay.”

“I love you so much, mom.” She weeps helplessly, looking almost like a frightened child in her mother’s arms. “I’ll be here, the whole time, whatever you need.”

“We all will be.” Agrees David.

“I know you will.” Dia smiles thankfully, tearfully, offering a hand to Tommy in an effort to include him in the emotional embrace she’s sharing with Lisa.

He hesitates for a moment, and I find myself struggling to decide if I should give him an actual nudge or not. I’m not sure if he remembers how to move right now. It’s entirely possible that he can’t even feel his legs.

Maybe he can’t feel anything at all.

I place my hand lightly in the center of his back, stroking gently with my fingertips until he finally seems to respond. He pushes himself out of his seat, taking one slow step forwards, and then another, until he’s close enough to reach out and take his mother’s hand. She pulls him in, tugging him down onto the small space beside her on the couch, and I can’t help but tear up as he hugs her tentatively.
I can see how afraid he is to do it, even though I know that he’s aware that nothing he does is going
to somehow make her condition worse. That rational thought is no match for the fear that’s probably
screaming in his head, though.

I wish I knew how to make this easier on him, but I don’t even know how to make tonight less
awful, let alone what’s to come.

Dia does her best to make dinner feel somewhat normal, so David and I do our best to play along.
But it’s useless. It’s completely fake, and none of us can keep up the pretense for more than a few
minutes at a time. Tommy doesn’t really try. It’s like he’s not even in his body, he’s gone and there’s
just a shell sitting at the dinner table beside me. Or it could be that he’s still in there, somewhere, and
he’s burrowed his way so deep inside his shell that no one can find him.

I want to crawl in there with him, but I don’t know how to even begin.

Our goodbyes at the end of the evening involve at least twice as much hugging as usual, and more
assurances that phone calls will be made, and that we’ll see each other again soon. I feel guilty
leaving before Lisa and David, but Tommy was the one who made the first move to go, and I wasn’t
about to force him to stay if he’d decided he couldn’t take any more. “We should be
getting home so Taylor’s brother can get some sleep”, was the most he’d said since the word
‘cancer’ was first uttered, so I knew it had taken a lot of effort for him to say it.

If the car ride out to Burbank was quiet, I don’t know how to describe the drive home. Usually when
we’re in the car we have music playing, but it feels inappropriate to turn the radio on.

Everything feels inappropriate.

I keep opening my mouth to say something, to ask him how he’s feeling, or to tell him it’ll be okay.
But it’s a stupid question, and an empty statement, and he doesn’t need either of those from me right
now. I don’t know what he needs.

When we get home, he heads straight into the house and up to our bedroom without a word. And
despite the overwhelming instinct I have to go with him, to be wherever he is, I’m not sure how that
would be helpful for him. More silence. More unasked questions.
What good will that do?

“Hey.” Zac mutes the TV as I walk into the family room, though the volume was already so low that I could barely understand what was being said on screen anyway. “How was dinner?”

“A awful.”

He frowns, shifting in his seat to give me his full attention. “Why?”

“It’s…” I run a hand through my hair and heave an incredibly weary sigh. “A lot. Too much for tonight.”

“Oh…”

“I’ll explain later, I promise.”

“Are you okay?”

Am I? It’s hard to be when Tommy isn’t, as horribly co-dependent as that may be. “Yeah, I’m fine, relatively speaking. It’s just…”

“A lot.” He nods in understanding, pointing the remote at the TV screen and shutting it off before getting off of the couch.

“Thanks for staying here with the kids so we could go out.”

“Even though it was awful?”

“Yeah.”

He shakes his head in confusion as I follow him through the dining room and out into the foyer.
“You’re definitely gonna need to fill me in tomorrow.”

I stand in the open front doorway, watching his rental car back out of the driveway and disappear from view. And even after he’s gone, I stay there, staring out into the darkness, listening to the soft breeze in the branches of the trees as it carries the distant honking of horns from Sunset Boulevard up into the hills. You’d think that after this evening I’d be sick of so much quiet. But this is a different kind. Everything is calm out here, familiar and reassuring. The silence isn’t smothering me, it’s soothing me.

When I head back inside and up to bed, I find Tommy standing out on our balcony, and I wonder if he’s doing the same thing I was just a few minutes ago on the front step. I’m afraid to disturb him in case he has found some kind of peace in the sound of silence.

“I figured it out.” He says, surprising me enough that it makes me jump a little. “What it was about her voice that freaked me out when she called before.”

“Was it because you knew she was sick?” I ask gently, taking a small step nearer.

He shakes his head faintly as he turns around to face me. “She sounded exactly the way she did when she called to tell me my dad was in the hospital.”

“Oh.” Shit. Of course that would trigger him. “But it doesn’t mean…” That she’s going to die, too. “It’s not the same. You know that… right?”

“Yeah...”

I take another step towards him, keeping every move I make slow and deliberate, giving him a chance to respond to each one before I make another. It’s like approaching a frightened animal, waiting for it to realize just how close you are and run for cover. But he doesn’t. He lets me take his hand, and he lets me pull him into my arms.

And he lets me kiss him softly.

At least, it starts as a soft graze of my lips against his. Then out of nowhere it’s as though that frightened animal snaps out of its state of shock and attacks me. I was expecting flight, not fight, but he’s definitely not trying to get away from me. He’s trying to pull me impossibly close, to the point
that it hurts. His kisses are bordering on vicious!

“Tommy-” I can’t get out more than his name before he’s using his mouth to suppress any protest I try to make. I don’t want to push him away, but I don’t feel like I have any other choice.

“You need to stop.”

“I don’t wanna stop.”

“Talk to me-”

“I don’t want to talk.” He practically growls at me, forcing his way out of the arm’s length grasp I was holding him at and crushing his lips to mine once again.

“Tommy-”

“Please?” I’m taken aback by that one word. He has my head spinning with the contrast between his demanding actions and the desperation in his tone. “I don’t need to talk. I don’t need to cry, or hug it out, or sleep, or drink, or eat, or any -fucking-thing else. None of that shit is gonna make me feel better. I need this. I need you.” He insists vehemently. “Please?”

All night, the only thing I wanted was to know what he needed so that I could make sure that he had it, whatever it was.

Apparently, it was me all along.
Chapter 33

He’s doing it again.

That avoidance thing he does so damn well. I swear he’s practically living in denial twenty-four-seven these days. He’d only just gotten past his feigned indifference to having another baby, I’d only just gotten him to admit that he cared. And now his head is well and truly buried in the sand all over again. Except that it’s not the surrogacy situation he’s acting apathetic about this time.

Whenever I try to talk to him about what’s going on with his mom, he brushes it off like it’s not really happening. He’ll say something like, “what’s there to talk about?” or “talking is overrated”, and then before I can argue with him he’s all over me like a rash. A really attractive, pleasureable rash…

It’s not the same as it was the last time he kept jumping on me. He was using sex to distract me before, now I’m pretty sure he’s using it to distract himself. I know I should stop him, I’ve tried to stop him. But all that accomplishes is pissing him off, which makes him even less inclined to bare his soul to me. He says there’s no point talking about any of it until after the surgery, when her doctors know more about what’s going on. He doesn’t want to “worry over nothing”, he wants to “stay positive”. And I get that, I really do. I’m all for good vibes and having hope. But once again, that’s not what he’s doing. In order to stay positive, he’d have to at least acknowledge that something might be wrong. And he won’t. He can’t.

I can.
I need to. I need to admit there’s a problem so that I can figure out how to deal with it; it’s how I cope. We’re so completely opposite in that respect. When faced with a problem, he finds it easier to ignore it and hope it’ll go away, while I go into ‘fix it’ mode and try to solve it. I know I can’t fix this, though. That’s not why I’m trying to learn as much about it as I can. I want to know what might be ahead so that I can prepare myself and be the best support I can be for him.

I did plenty of googling in the days after Dia told us that she was sick. Every site I went to said the same thing: it’s easier to treat ovarian cancer if it’s caught early, but it’s rarely caught early because by the time the symptoms are bad enough for people to go to a doctor, it’s already pretty advanced. I wasn’t particularly happy with that answer, so I ditched the internet and called the only person I know who has any kind of experience in the medical field.

Holden doesn’t work with cancer patients a lot, and he repeatedly reminded me of that fact. But he also confirmed that, to the best of his knowledge, everything I had read was accurate. There was a chance that Dia’s cancer wasn’t too far along, but the fact that her scans suggested there were other tumors aside from the ones in her ovaries meant that it was likely the cancer had spread. We wouldn’t know for sure until after her surgery, when the doctors would be able to ‘stage’ her cancer.

Obviously, he knew I wasn’t calling to ask about ovarian cancer out of random curiosity. But I was able to avoid telling him exactly why I needed to know. I said someone in my family had recently been diagnosed, which wasn’t a complete lie. Besides, it helped me to maintain Dia’s privacy.

And Tommy’s.

The only person I’ve told the whole truth to is Zac, and I felt like shit when I did it. I’m pretty sure he’s the last person Tommy would want to share this news with. But I had to tell him something; he was there when we came home from dinner, he saw how upset I was, and I promised him I would explain what had happened. He said that he wouldn’t tell a soul, and I trust him. I tell him everything. Besides, with Tommy refusing to acknowledge that there’s even a problem, I need someone to vent to. Otherwise I’m going to start taking it out on Tommy and the kids, which is completely unfair and the opposite of what Tommy needs right now.

At least, I don’t think it’s what he needs.

But who knows, maybe being yelled at would snap him out of the numbness he seems to be stuck in? I’m just not willing to test that theory.
Yet.

Today is a pretty big day for us, so maybe he’ll actually feel compelled to show some emotion. All of his and Shauntae’s test results came back normal earlier this week, which means there’s no reason we can’t move forward. We’re heading into the surrogacy offices just before lunch to go over the finalized paperwork with Alyssa. Once we’ve signed and initialled in all the right places, Shauntae and our egg donor will be able to start their respective fertility treatments, and we should have a better idea of when the egg retrieval and embryo transfer will happen.

Honestly, after finding out that his mom was sick, I wasn’t sure if Tommy would even want to continue trying to have a baby. Not until everything had settled down, at least. I figured the stress of Dia’s surgery and cancer treatments would be more than enough for him to handle without adding anything else to the mix, so I told him that it was okay if we put things on hold for a while if he wanted to. But he assured me that he was fine.

Just like he has assured me that he’s fine every time I’ve asked him how he is this week.

I mentioned our appointment at the surrogacy offices to Holden during our conversation the other day, and he suggested that we meet up for lunch afterwards and celebrate. I agreed without hesitation, because it has been way too long since we’ve had a face-to-face conversation. Hell, even if we’d seen each other just last week, I still wouldn’t say no to hanging out with him!

Thankfully, recording has been going so smoothly this week that Ike didn’t even bat an eyelash when I told him I had an “appointment” that I couldn’t reschedule. I was expecting him to complain about me being flakey, or not showing an appropriate amount of commitment to finishing the new album, because he can be dramatic like that. But he barely even glanced at me as he told me it was fine, and that he and Zac could just work on some mixing until I get back.

Laid back, everything-is-going-right Ike is my favorite kind of Ike.

“I fucking hate paperwork.” Tommy mumbles glumly as we step into the elevator and I push the button for the floor the surrogacy agency is on. “They always make everything way too complicated, and say the same shit over and over again. It’s like they want you to get sick of reading it so you’ll start skimming it just to get it the fuck over with. Then you’ll end up signing away your soul or something without realizing it.”

“Well, lucky for you, you already sold your soul in exchange for eternal youth and beauty years ago, so no one can con you out of it now.”
A hint of a smile graces his lips, just for a second, and then the sulky scowl returns. “It still sucks that they can’t just keep it simple and not make you read through like twenty pages of needless bullshit just to get to the point.”

“Good thing it’s worth it.”

“True.”

“I’ll make you a deal.” I propose conspiratorially as the elevator comes to a stop at our floor, and I stand between the open doors to block him from exiting. “I’ll do all the actual reading, and you can just fake read. I’ll summarize it for you later.”

“That’s not a deal, it’s a really generous offer.”

“No, because I expect you to use all of that free time you’ll have while staring at the paperwork and not reading it to come up with a way to repay me.”

“Deal.” He grins. “I have a couple of ideas already...”

“I bet you do.”

As we step out into the lobby and let the receptionist know that we’re here for our appointment, it hits me how normal this feels now. Our very first visit to this office was only two months ago, and we haven’t been here many times since then, but apparently it has become a frequent enough occurrence for this to all feel routine to me. I’m not nervous like I was on that first visit, and Tommy isn’t fidgeting away beside me with uncontrollable anxiety. He’s slumped in a chair, scrolling through his twitter feed on his phone like this is no big deal. Because even though we’re about to sign some of the most important paperwork anyone will probably ever put in front of us, none of this feels quite so intimidating anymore. There’s a lot less uncertainty now.

We made it.

“Hi, guys.” Alyssa greets us warmly as she makes her way across the waiting area. “Ready?”
“Definitely.” I tell her, tossing aside the magazine that I was flipping through but not even looking at. “I think we’ve been ready since day one.”

“Okay, well, come on back and we’ll get started!”

Just as I get out of my seat to follow her, Tommy grabs me by the arm and holds me back. “So… I know we were kidding around before, but-”

“Don’t worry.” I smirk as I curl an arm loosely around his waist and lead him towards Alyssa’s office. “I’ll do all the reading, you just sit there and look pretty.”

“I can do that.”

“I would hope so. It’s not like it’s a challenge for you.”

He shoots a playful glare at me, shoving me gently away from him just before we reach the doorway and find her waiting for us. She is oblivious to the entire exchange, and we both revert to behaving like adults before she has a chance to witness our play fighting. Sometimes I swear we’re better at getting away with being childish than our kids are.

“Can you believe you’ve made it to this point already?” She asks, gesturing for us to take a seat at her desk as she closes the door. “It feels like you were only just in here for our first meeting a couple of weeks ago.”

“To me it feels like it’s been at least twice as long as it’s actually been since we first came in here.” Admits Tommy with a quiet, almost shy chuckle. “A lot’s happened the last couple of months.”

“I completely understand. I think the wait feels long for all intended parents, no matter how quickly or slowly the process unfolds for them. I have to say, though, compared to some of my clients, yours has been a pretty smooth road.”

“I think maybe I was like… off roading, then.” He jokes. “’Cause it seemed like a bumpy ride to me.”
“Well, let’s hope that you’re past all of the bumps at this point.” She smiles sympathetically. “It seems as though you’ve really connected with Shauntae, which is wonderful. I never want intended parents to become so impatient that they ‘settle’ for a surrogate who they aren’t one hundred percent sure about.”

“We’re two hundred percent sure about her.” I assure Alyssa gratefully. “One hundred percent each. You did an awesome job matching us with her.”

“Thank you! I’m so glad I was able to help the two of you take this step. And I really hope you’ll check in from time to time and keep me updated on how everything is going.”

Tommy frowns, glancing at me uncertainly as though I forgot to tell him something. I’d apologize for the oversight, but I have no idea what information I withheld! “Is this the last time we’ll see you?”

“Hopefully it will be the last time you’ll need to see me, at least for a while.” She clarifies. “Once the paperwork is taken care of, you’ll be moving on to working with the fertility clinic. My part is done, basically. Unless, for some reason, you change your mind about the egg donor, or Shauntae, or both.”

“Wow… that’s so crazy. I mean, I knew this was pretty much the last part of this stage or whatever. But I guess I never thought about the fact that we wouldn’t need to come here again.”

“Me either.” I laugh softly. “It’s so weird… I was just getting used to this place.”

“I don’t like for my clients to feel too at home here.” She winks playfully. “If they’ve been here long enough to feel that comfortable, it means I’m not doing my job very well.”

“Good point.”

“But if you have any questions or concerns, you can always call me or email me. And I’ll be sure to touch base with you every so often, too. Just because we won’t be working together directly anymore, I’ll still be your contact at the agency, and I’m happy to help in any way I can.”

This suddenly seems so much bigger than it did five minutes ago. I knew it was important; entering
into a legally binding agreement with the woman who is going to carry your child for you is in no way insignificant. I was excited about it, ready for it… and now I’m nervous. Like I said, I was just getting used to this place; the building, the people, the coffee… now I’m going to have to get used to a whole new set of those things at the fertility clinic. And I’m guessing the atmosphere there won’t be as relaxed. There’ll be doctors, and nurses, and petri dishes…

“Taylor?” I blink away the mental images of speculums and sterile cups to find Tommy looking at me with apprehensive amusement. “You okay?”

“Yeah. Just… thinking.”

“Well, when you’ve recovered from that…” He pushes a small pile of papers towards me on the desk top.

Here we go...

Signing the paperwork is pretty surreal. Which is odd, because there was nothing in there that I wasn’t expecting, no surprises, nothing I felt the need to question or ask to have changed in any way. It was less overwhelming and exhausting than signing my mortgage when I moved here, that’s for sure. But this is all so entirely different from my prior experiences with procreating.

Though, I do have to admit that every time Natalie and I tried to conceive, it felt kind of like signing some kind of contract. Renewing a promise I’d made, to her and to myself, that I would stay for the rest of my life. It wasn’t an agreement I wanted to make, it was something I had to talk myself into over and over again. I had to reassure myself I could handle it, I had to take deep breaths and push through.

I didn’t have to take deep breaths and talk myself into signing the papers Alyssa gave us. If anything, I had to stop myself from flipping to the last page and scrawling my name without reading a single word of it first!

After all of the I’s have been dotted and the T’s have been crossed, we end up chatting with Alyssa a little longer about what comes next and what to expect. It’s nothing we didn’t know from doing our own research, but it’s nice to hear it all from someone we (sort of) know. She makes it sound easier than it probably is, but given our current circumstances, we need all the simplicity we can get.

Sometimes it seems as though life always becomes more complicated right when you start to get
comfortable. The minute you think to yourself, “things are going well!”; something crazy happens and you have to reevaluate everything. Getting too complacent probably won’t be an issue for us for the foreseeable future, though. The surrogacy process alone has the potential to be an emotional rollercoaster. Hopefully not one of those rickety old rollercoasters that falls apart in the middle of a ride and sends a dozen people plummeting to their death…

The point is, now that Dia is sick, sailing is likely to be even less smooth. I want to celebrate each step forwards that Tommy and I take, but I also don’t want to let myself get too wrapped up in it. I don’t want to forget the challenges we still face; it’s harder to handle disappointment when you forget that it might be lurking right around the next corner.

Or, in Tommy’s case, when you close your eyes, stick your fingers in your ears, and hope that disappointment will go away if you ignore it for long enough.

“Maybe we should call Holden and cancel?” He suggests nonchalantly as we stroll down the sunny streets of Beverly Hills towards the restaurant we’re supposed to be having lunch at.

“Why?” I frown in confusion. “We haven’t seen him or Ryan in almost two months, and I thought you wanted to celebrate?”

“I do. I just figured we’d have more fun celebrating at home. Alone.”

“Don’t get me wrong, I’m all for having our own private celebration. But we can do that after we see our friends. Besides, Holden made it sound like he had something he wanted to tell us, too.”

He sighs heavily, and I can’t keep the smile off me my face as he rolls his eyes in a melodramatic demonstration of his grievance. “Fine.”

“I’m sorry, baby.” I coddle him mockingly, grabbing him by the back of his jacket when it looks like he’s about to walk right past the restaurant. “I know how much you hate being around other members of the human race.”

“So why the fuck do you make me do it all the time?” He pouts, but he puts up little to no fight when I try to pull him closer for a kiss.

“Because… you gotta be cruel to be kind. And tough love. Or… something along those lines. I’m
“You’re torturing me and you don’t even know why?” With a disgusted head shake, he places his palm over my mouth and pushes my face away from his. “You’re twisted.”

“I thought that was one of the things you loved most about me.”

He doesn’t respond, but I can see him struggling to keep the scowl on his face as the hostess approaches us. It turns out we’re late (shocking!), so Holden and Ryan have already been seated and are waiting for us. When I realize that the hostess is leading us to one of the tables out on the patio in front of the restaurant, I mentally kick myself for not getting here on time. If we had, I could have asked for a different table.

Usually when we eat out in areas like this, I try to be seated indoors, or on a back patio if there is one. Sitting at a sidewalk table, or even by a window, always leaves you open to a sneak attack by the stalkerazzi. And then you’re screwed if you do anything but smile at the person you’re dining with, because the slightest hint of displeasure on your face can land you in a gossip magazine. I once frowned at Tommy during dinner, frowned, and suddenly the future of our marriage was being called into question on TMZ. It was ridiculous!

Before I met Tommy, I could get together with friends in Hollywood while I was here on business, and pictures of us might wind up on some online blog. But no one cared and no one attached meaning to something as insignificant as a fleeting facial expression. Ever since the media found out that Tommy and I are together, we’ve become one of those couples that warrants attention.

We’re generally pretty lucky compared to most celebrities, though, because we’re relatively low key. We go to parties and events sometimes, sure, but in our day to day lives we have five kids in tow, so we rarely end up at the kind of establishments that other celebrities (and therefore photographers) tend to frequent. To the best of my knowledge, the last time we were caught on camera was when we took the kids to see the Christmas Parade at Hollywood and Highland last year, and those shots were hardly incriminating. We made it into a two page US Weekly spread of pictures of other celebrity parents and their kids attending various Christmas events around town. Which I’m sure most people probably flipped right past because of the complete lack of scandal.

“Hey, sorry we’re late!” I apologize as both Holden and Ryan stand from their seats to greet us with hugs. “We got to talking with Alyssa and lost track of time.”

“That’s your intended parent coordinator, right?” Asks Ryan, pouring us both a glass of water from the half empty bottle in the middle of the table.
“Yeah. Well… I guess she’s kinda not anymore.” Tommy replies thoughtfully. “I mean, she was just telling us that her job is done now. Like we can still call her and everything, but we probably won’t see her again unless something goes wrong.”

“That’s good, though! I means you’re moving on to the actual baby making!”

“If only it was as much fun for us as it is for straight couples.” Holden laments semi-seriously.

“Have you guys decided if, or when, you’re going to give it another try?” I ask gently, not wanting to ruin our lunch date before it has even begun by depressing them both.

But judging by the way my question brings wide grins to both of their faces, I’d say it’s not the sensitive topic I’d assumed it would be. “Actually, we already did.”

“Did what?” Frowns Tommy.

“Tried again.” Holden clarifies almost giddily. “We decided not to tell anyone this time, because we didn’t want to have to deal with telling anyone if it wasn’t successful again.”

“But you’re telling us now. So… does that mean it was successful?”

His grin somehow seems to spread even further as he nods. “We just got the beta results a few days ago.”

“Oh my god! That’s incredible!” I exclaim, almost knocking my water glass over in my haste to jump up and offer him a congratulatory hug. “I’m so happy for you. For both of you.”

“We’re happy for both of us, too.” Chuckles Ryan as he accepts a hug of his own. “It was kinda scary this time around, you know? Last time we were all hopeful and excited, and even though we knew it might not happen for us right away, it was like we thought that fact didn’t apply to us or something, like everything was just gonna be perfect right off the bat just ‘cause we wanted it to be. Which is obviously not how it works.”
“So not how it works.” Holden sighs, resting his arm across the back of Ryan’s chair. “And knowing we could only afford to try this one more time was… well, stressful isn’t an adequate descriptor.”

“I’d already decided that if it didn’t work, I was going to curl up on my bed and die of a broken heart like one of those women in a boring old British novels.” Declares Ryan unashamedly, and I have to bite my lip to keep myself from laughing so loudly that everyone around us will likely turn to see what’s so funny. “But, thankfully, I don’t have to be an old British woman.”

“Good, because I prefer you as a young, hot, American man.” Smirks Holden as he leans in and pecks his husband on the cheek.

“Did you do anything different this time?” Tommy questions curiously, like he’s about to whip out a notepad and start writing down every helpful hint he can get. “A different donor, or another surrogate? Or was it just luck?”

“Same donor and surrogate, but not entirely luck.” Ryan tells him, casting a smug smile Holden’s way. “You wanna tell them, or should I?”

“Go for it, honey.” Holden smiles knowingly, relaxing in his seat and sipping on his water as Ryan eagerly leans forward to fill us in on this apparent secret to successful IVF.

“PGS.”

I stare at him in silence for a moment, wondering if those three letters are supposed to mean anything to me. And I’m glad to see the same lost look on Tommy’s face when we happen to glance at each other at the exact same moment.

“Elaborate.” Holden prods him teasingly.

“Pre-implantation Genetic Screening.” He explains simply. “It this thing they do where they biopsy the embryo before it’s transferred and find out if it’s normal.”

“Without PGS, they pretty much just select embryos based on how they look.” Holden tells us. “And a lot of the time that’s fine, but it’s not a guarantee that the embryo they transfer won’t have a chromosomal abnormality of some kind that could prevent it from implanting or cause a miscarriage.”
Usually they only recommend the test to people who’re carriers of a genetic disorder, or who’ve had several miscarriages or failed IVF attempts. But I heard about it from someone at work, and I figured it was better if we spend a little extra money and give ourselves the absolute best shot we could of succeeding than to just cross our fingers and hope. It wasn’t cheap, it was pretty much most of what we had left in savings, but—

“But what good would that extra five grand sitting in the bank do us if this second round of IVF had failed? It wouldn’t have been enough for another cycle, so we would’ve been S.O.L.”

“We need to do this.” Tommy informs me without hesitation, his eyes so full of pleading and hope that I feel as though he could ask me for anything right now and I would be incapable of refusing him. “I mean, if we’d have a better shot right away, and we might not have to do it more than once…”

“We’ll talk to the doctor about it.” I assure him, placing my hand over his on the table and giving it a gentle squeeze. “I promise.”

Our waitress decides that now is a good time to come over and introduce herself, offering us all something more to drink and asking if we would like any appetizers. And while Holden and I apologetically tell her that we haven’t had chance to look at the menu yet, Tommy and Ryan continue discussing the magic of genetic screening. I don’t know why I’m not as enthusiastic about it as he is. I have nothing against genetic testing, and I certainly am not opposed to anything that might help us have a baby without suffering through the heartache of a failed IVF cycle the way Holden and Ryan did.

I guess what bothers me is that, even if this might be a positive, emotionally healthy kind of avoidance... it’s still a form of avoidance.

At what point is it doing him more harm than good to dodge dealing with disappointment in any way he can?
Seeing Holden and Ryan, and hearing that their second IVF cycle was successful definitely made me a little more hopeful that Tommy and I will soon be celebrating a positive pregnancy test with our surrogate. Not soon enough for us, but as long as it’s within the next few months, I think our combined patience will just about get us through. It was exciting to see the two of them so happy, playfully bickering over baby names and whether or not they want to know the sex of the baby before it’s born. Holden wants to be surprised in the delivery room. Ryan, on the other hand, wants to be surprised at some elaborate ‘gender reveal’ party.

Natalie and I never did anything like that. She had baby showers with each of our kids, but discovering the sex of a baby via cake colors or a box full of balloons wasn’t as trendy then as it is now. The barely disguised look of distaste on Tommy’s face as Ryan described how he wanted to have the gender revealed to everyone at the party told me everything I needed to know about his opinion on the subject. I think it’d be a fun thing to do for our kids, but I don’t think the two of us will have enough willpower to say “no” when the ultrasound tech asks us if we want to know the sex of the baby!

“Do we get to have a baby shower?” Tommy asks thoughtfully, turning the car radio down because obviously this is an incredibly important topic of conversation. “Isn’t it usually like a thing the mom does with her girlfriends?”

“Most of the time. But some couples have a baby shower with the dad there, and they invite all their friends and family, not just the women.”
“But the person carrying the baby is still supposed to be there, right? Doesn’t everyone have to like guess her weight, and how many centimeters she’s dilated or whatever?”

God, he’s adorable. “I think traditionally people have to guess how big her belly is with pieces of yarn.”

“So… would it be weird to have a baby shower with two dads and a surrogate? Do people do that?” He frowns as he stares straight ahead out of the windshield. “Or do we just get screwed out of having a baby shower because we’re godless, science worshiping, woman exploiting, sinners?”

“Okay, first of all,” I pause for a moment in order to get my laughter under control enough to speak in full sentences. “You want to have a baby shower?”

“I want presents.” He smirks. “I wanna go to Babies R Us and make a registry with one of those little scanner gun thingies.”

“That is pretty fun…”

With a half-hearted shrug and a wistful sigh, he turns his face away from mine and watches as the streets of Hollywood rush by on the other side of the window. “I wanna do it all.”

And I want him to have the opportunity to do it all.

He deserves to experience every last thing that any other expectant father would, and I don’t want him to feel like any of it is off limits to him because we’re gay, or because the woman giving birth to our baby isn’t the biological mother, she’s a stranger who is being paid to carry and deliver our baby. We’ve never let anyone tell us that we can’t have the same things that straight couples have, and this is no different.

I really don’t want to go back to the house right now. I want to keep driving, just the two of us, I don’t even care where we end up. But my responsible side won’t hear of it, not when Ike and Zac are only going to be in town for a couple more days and we still have work to do on the album. So I talk myself out of getting onto the freeway, reassuring myself that I have the rest of my life to go on destinationless drives with my husband.

Just as we pull into the driveway, Tommy receives a text message. I notice it out of the corner of my
eye when he turns his phone over in his hand to see who it’s from. And then he just as quickly turns it back over and stuffs it into the pocket of his jacket. I don’t usually pry when he gets texts and phone calls; it’s none of my business who he talks to, and if he wants to tell me he will. But his reaction to this particular text piques my interest.

“Something wrong?”

“Nope. Nothing.” He replies simply, flashing me a smile that I’m guessing is intended to reinforce his answer.

All it does is further convince me that he’s lying. “Who was it?”

“No one.” He tells me as he quickly unbuckles his seatbelt and gets out of the car.

I follow him into the house, trying to come up with a way of getting the truth out of him without totally pissing him off in the process. But my plotting is brought to an abrupt halt as soon as the front door closes. I turn to face him and he practically pounces on me, causing me to stumble backwards into the wall behind me. His kisses are so insistent that it takes me a few attempts to tear my mouth from his and catch my breath, and he wastes no time in relocating his lips to my neck. It would be so easy to just go along with this, to give in to him and let him tug my jacket off and lead me up to our bedroom…

But all I’d really be doing is helping him smother whatever it is he’s feeling, helping him to push it down and dump a whole lot of endorphins on top of it until he can forget it’s even there.

I’ve done that too many times already.

While he’s busy unbuttoning my shirt, I carefully reach into the pocket of his jacket. He doesn’t realize what I’m doing at first; he feels me fumbling and probably figures I’m trying to take his clothes off. But he’s only fooled for a few seconds. Luckily, that’s just enough time for me to fish his phone out and turn the screen on so I can see the text. I don’t have chance to read it before he snatches it out of my hand, but I saw enough to know that it was from his mom and it had something to do with her surgery.

“What the fuck?!” He snaps angrily. “Do I go reading your texts?”
“Your mom isn’t ‘no one’, and her surgery isn’t ‘nothing’.”

“So? That doesn’t give you the right to pull shit like this!”

I take a breath and try to remain calm. One of us needs to. “It’s not like I enjoy doing this kind of thing, Tommy. But when you lie right to my face, I don’t feel like I have much of a choice.”

“I just didn’t wanna talk about it right now, okay?” He turns away from me and stalks angrily out of the foyer in the direction of the kitchen.

It takes me a moment to decide whether to go after him or give him space to cool off. But if I let this go again, if I give him time to cool off, he’s not going to talk to me. It’s like hitting a reset button, making it so that the argument never happened and the reason for it never existed. We’d just go back to how things were before, and nothing would get resolved.

When I walk into the kitchen, I find him rummaging around in the fridge. Considering the fact that we just ate, I doubt it’s food he’s looking for. And since he rarely drinks soda, and the orange juice is sitting right there in plain sight, I’m guessing it’s beer he’s looking for. Unfortunately for him, he finished the one remaining bottle last night.

That’s not gonna improve his mood.

“I’m sorry.” The only response I get is him harshly pushing the fridge shut in frustration. “I shouldn’t have taken your phone. I’m just… worried about you.”

“I’m fine.”

Bullshit. “You don’t have to be fine. No one expects you to be fine—”

“But I am .” He maintains adamantly. “And I’d be even better if you would just leave me the fuck alone.”

“You know I can’t.”
“Fine.” He mutters, walking across the room towards me. At first I don’t know what it is he’s doing, but when he storms right by me and back towards the front door, it’s not hard to figure out.

I’ve barely taken a step in the same direction when I hear the front door slam shut, and I know that it’s pointless going after him. Even if I do make it outside before he gets into his car, the odds of him so much as cracking a window open to hear me out are slim to none.

We went almost two whole years without him walking out on me the way he just did. And we also went two whole years without him having much reason to. Yeah, we’d fight sometimes, but not to the point of either of us leaving. The last few months have been the hardest we’ve had to get through since my accident, though. He may have stopped physically running from me after that, but he would still withdraw emotionally when faced with something he didn’t know how to handle. Usually it just takes him a little time, and I’m generally happy to give him that time if it’s what he needs. But this is different. This is bigger, and there is no time. It’s happening now.

So instead of leaving him alone, I pushed, and pulled, and prodded… and he ran.

“You okay?” I hear Zac ask in concern, pulling me out of the staring match I was having with the patch of thin air in front of me. “I was coming up here to get a soda and I thought I heard something fall.”

“You heard the front door slam.”

“Oh.” He’s relieved for all of a second, and then it seems to dawn on him why the front door slammed. “Oh.”

“It’s… whatever. He got mad at me and he left. It happens.”

“A lot?” He frowns.

“No. Pretty much never, until recently.” I sigh as I lean against the kitchen counter behind me for support. “He’s just having a hard time.”

“Because of his mom?”
I nod sadly, giving a helpless shrug. “I don’t know how to help him, Zac. I don’t know what he needs from me. Aside from…”

“Aside from… what?”

“Nothing.”

It doesn’t matter whether I say it out loud or not. In fact, I think it’s my unwillingness to say it out loud that answers his question. “Oh. Well… sometimes that does help.”

“In some ways. But he needs to talk about everything if he wants to deal with it.”

“Maybe he doesn’t wanna deal with it?” He offers gently. “If it were our mom, I’d probably avoid thinking about it or talking about it as much as possible, too. No one wants to have to face that kind of thing.”

“Yeah, but even if you didn’t want to talk about it, you would. I wouldn’t want to deal with it, either, but ignoring it doesn’t make it go away. If Dia has cancer, he can’t pretend it’s not happening or act like it’s no big deal. He’s going to have to face it sooner or later, and I think the longer he leaves it, the harder it’s going to hit him.”

“You’re probably right.”

“So what should I do?” I ask him, desperate for someone to give me a solution to this problem, to think of something I haven’t been able to come up with by myself.

“I don’t know, dude. I don’t know him well enough to know what would help or what might make it worse.”

“If it was you, would you want me to keep pushing you, or leave you alone?”

There a considerable pause as he weighs his options, wary of giving me bad advice and somehow making things even harder than they already are. But eventually he takes a long, deep breath and looks me in the eyes.
The jury has reached its verdict.

“I would want you to leave me alone.” Damn. I was so hoping he wouldn’t say that. “But... I think it would be better for me in the long run if you didn’t.”

“Thanks, Zac.”

“Sure.” He smiles faintly, sadly, giving my shoulder a supportive squeeze. “Just... promise me you’ll try to separate your feelings from his?”

“What do you mean?” I ask in confusion. “You think I’m assuming he feels something he doesn’t because it’s what I feel?”

“No. I think you have a wonderful and terrible ability to empathize with people. Sometimes you over-empathize, and you take on other people’s emotions and try to carry everyone else’s crap for them... you can only take on so much, Tay. I know you love him, and I know you’re co-dependent as hell, but try not to feel everything he’s feeling, okay? You’re no use to him if you’re drowning, too.”

“Where do you get off knowing me so damn well?”

“What can I say? I’ve learned a lot from you over the years. Watching you make endless mistakes taught me what not to do.”

I scowl a I give him a playful shove in the direction of the studio. “Jerk.”

“Dumbass.” He chuckles, pushing me sideways into a wall.

For the next few hours I try to focus all of my attention on work rather than worrying about where Tommy is or when he’ll be home. I send him a couple of texts, one apologizing and the other asking him if he wants me to pick up the kids. He’s been handling the summer camp and pre-school runs the last couple of weeks so that I can get as much time in the studio as possible. But I don’t want to assume that today is going to be like any other day; it sure as hell hasn’t played out like any other day.
His only response to my question is, “why would I?”, like he didn’t just storm out of the house without explanation. I initially type a reply which says almost exactly that, but I delete it instead of sending it. I don’t see how it’d make him any less angry, and the more texts I send him while he’s trying to be “left the fuck alone”, the more annoyed at me he’ll be when he finally does come home.

He shows up with the kids just as I’m finishing up with making dinner. It’s later than we usually get them home, but I don’t bother mentioning that. I act like it’s totally normal, telling them to go wash up and set the table. Before I can ask Tommy if he’s okay, he curtly informs me that he’s meeting a friend for dinner and he’ll be back “later”. In my head I’m demanding to know who it is, and why he didn’t tell me this in a text as soon as he made plans. But apparently I’m too dumbfounded to speak, because nothing comes out of my mouth as I watch him turn and walk out on me.

Again.

It’s never easy to put on a happy face and act like everything is fine when it’s not, especially not around the kids. Adults are easy to fool most of the time, they have too much of their own crap going on. But kids can feel it when something isn’t right, the same way animals can sense an oncoming storm. It’s a good thing I have Ike and Zac on hand to keep them distracted from the fact that Tommy isn’t here, I’m not sure I could have done it alone.

I should have known Ezra wouldn’t be preoccupied by his uncles being extra chatty all through dinner, though. If anything it probably tipped him off to the fact that something isn’t right. I wouldn’t be surprised if Penny was on to me, too, but Ezra is the only one to confront me about it. I could tell I was busted when he offered to help with the dishes instead of arguing with his siblings about whose turn it was.

“How was camp today?” I ask in a last ditch attempt to keep his questions at bay.

“It was okay.” He shrugs somewhat indifferently. “Some days are fun, others are kinda dull.”

“You’re one of the older kids there.” I remind him as I set my pile of dishes down beside the sink and turn the water on. “Next summer you’ll be too old to even go to that camp.”

“I think I’d rather just hang out here anyway.”

“Oh… well, if you’re not enjoying it all that much, you don’t have to go. I mean, your brothers need
stuff like this, they need to be playing and running around all day, or they’ll drive everyone crazy. But you’re old enough to keep yourself entertained without destroying the house in the process.”

“So… does that mean I can stay home tomorrow if I want?” He asks hopefully. “Can I hang out in the studio?”

I can’t help but smile at his enthusiasm. I’m honestly still getting used to him wanting to spend time with me! “Yeah, sure, I don’t see why not.”

“Dad?”

“Yeah?”

“Is Tommy okay? When he picked us up today he was kinda… I don’t know. Not mad, just… weird.” He admits quietly. “He seemed upset about something.”

The lie is right there on the tip of my tongue, I could easily tell him that Tommy is fine. But I’m pretty sure he’d know it’s a lie the second it passes my lips, so what’s the point in telling it? “He was upset. He is upset.”

“Did something go wrong with the baby stuff?”

“No.” I smile faintly, handing him a damp dish to place in the dishwasher. “Everything’s going well with the surrogacy stuff, actually”

“So why is he upset?”

“Because…” I instinctively cast a glance at him as I weigh the pros and cons of being completely honest. He’s definitely old enough to hear the truth, I’m just not sure Tommy wants the kids to know yet. “If I tell you something, do you promise you’ll keep it a secret from your brothers and sisters? And that you won’t tell Tommy that I told you?” He hesitates for a moment, his eyes studying my serious expression intently before he gives a slow nod of agreement. “Dia is sick. We don’t know exactly what’s wrong yet, but… she needs to have surgery soon, and she’s probably going to be feeling pretty bad for a while.”
“Is she… will she be okay?”

“I don’t know, buddy. I really hope so.”

“Me, too.”

I spend the rest of the evening with my brothers and my kids, watching River, Zac and Ezra playing video games together while Penny, Viggo and Ike opt for some good old fashioned board games. Both options involve a lot of laughter, a lot of shouting, and more than a few accusations of cheating (usually launched by the adults in the room because they’re not mature enough to handle being beaten by a child). Asta has never really shown an interest in video games, and she will only participate in board games when everyone agrees to play by her rules (which she makes up as it suits her). So she opts to sit both out and snuggle on the couch with me instead, which is definitely one of my prefered ways to spend an evening. It feels like one of those times when I should be looking around and finding myself thinking about how lucky I am and how perfect my life is.

If Tommy were here, or if I knew where he was and that he was okay, maybe I would be able to bask in that sense of contentment.

Just as I’m about to announce that it’s bedtime, I get a text from Tommy asking if either of my brothers are still at the house. I’m not entirely sure why that matters to him, but they are, and when I tell him that he asks if I can get one of them to stay with the kids so that I can meet him at a bar. To say that I’m confused is an understatement. I’ve received drunk texts from him before, and they’re rarely as legible as the ones he just sent me, so I doubt he needs me to come and pick him up because he’s too inebriated to drive himself home.

Ike and Zac both volunteer to stay and put the kids to bed. I guess they want to spend as much time with them as they can before they have to head back to Tulsa, which is more than fine with me. Especially when it facilitates me leaving the house to track down my crazy husband at some random dive bar.

The bar is pretty empty when I arrive. I can’t decide if it’s still too early for most people to be out drinking, or if this place is just too much of a hole for anyone to actually patronize it. Tommy’s rarely hard for me to spot even in a crowded room, so in an almost empty one he sticks out like a sore thumb. I take a seat beside him at the bar, but rather than ordering myself a drink, I simply take the bottle of beer out of his hand and finish off what little was left in it.

“I thought you were having dinner with a friend?”
“I did.” He tells me in a near mumble, spinning the beer stained coaster in front of him on the bar top. “Then we came here for a drink. He left right before I texted you.”

“Was it Isaac?” I ask curiously, not that it really matters. It’s hardly the most important question I could be posing.

He exhales a soft, sad breath of laughter. “No, Devon. I can’t even remember the last time I saw Isaac.”

My first instinct is to ask him how he feels about that, and if something is going on between them that he hasn’t told me about. I’m pretty sure nothing is wrong, and that it’s just a matter of Isaac being away on tour a lot. And I know how much that sucks, and that not getting to see his best friend for months at a time must be really hard on him, especially lately.

But once again, that’s not what we need to be talking about right now, and I refuse to let myself be sidetracked by my sympathy for him.

“Why am I here? Why didn’t you just come home?”

“Because… I figured a public place was safer.”

“Safer?” I frown. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“It means that I’m way less likely to yell at you or do something fucking pathetic like cry if there are other people around.” He explains, offering me a faint smile. “I have to behave myself.”

“I don’t wanna fight with you anymore. I never wanted to fight with you, but-”

“I know.” He cuts me off quickly, before I can try to explain my actions or apologize for them. He doesn’t need me to do either. “I know you were only trying to help, and you were trying to do what you thought was best, ’cause that’s all you ever do.”
“But it wasn’t what you needed.”

“No, it was. It just wasn’t what I wanted. I didn’t want to deal with it, I still don’t.” His fingers slowly stop turning the coaster, and he stares at it silently for a moment before his eyes rise to meet my worried gaze. “I don’t wanna think about my mom being sick, because I don’t wanna think about her not being here.”

“Tommy-”

“I’m a grown-ass man, and I’m losing my shit because I’m scared my mommy might die.” He chuckles mirthlessly as he shakes his head. “I don’t need her, Taylor. I haven’t needed her in years-”

“It doesn’t matter. She’s your mom, and you love her, and you want her to be okay. Just because you’re a ‘grown-ass man’, that doesn’t make it less okay for you to want your mom around. Hell, if I could make it so that my parents would live until they’re one-hundred-and-ten, I’d do it. I want them around until the day I die.”

“What if she’s not around, though?” He asks, his voice wavering faintly before he takes a breath to steady himself. “What if it’s really bad, and they can’t do anything for her? What if she’s not here when we have this baby? She wanted me to have kids so badly, and it took me so fucking long to grow up and get my shit together that she might not even live to see it!”

“But she might. We don’t know yet, and we won’t know until after her surgery.” I remind him gently as I reach for his hand. I’ve barely brushed his skin before he grabs ahold of my fingers and squeezes them tightly. “I know it’s going to be hard, but people beat this kind of thing all the time. I never wanted you to deal with the idea of her dying. I just wanted you to deal with the fact that she’s sick, and that you’re scared. It’s okay to be scared.”

“I don’t wanna be scared. Me being scared isn’t gonna help anyone.”

“Maybe not, but you can’t just decide not to feel something like that.”

“Why?” He demands petulantly, the way our kids do when we tell them they can’t have what they want. Like there’s no good reason for it and we’re just saying no to spite them. “Why can’t I just be strong and brave and… stalwart? Whatever the fuck that means.”
It feels inappropriate to laugh, but there’s no way I can stop myself. “You are. You’re strong, and brave, and incredibly stalwart.”

“Stalwart is a good thing, right? You’re not like calling me a pussy or something?”

“I’m not, I promise.” I chuckle softly as I turn in my seat to face him, cupping his cheek in my palm and leaning in to him. “How about this: you can be brave when you’re with your mom, and when you’re with me you can be scared? You can be both, because you are both, and that’s okay. Okay?”

He nods gratefully, and I can feel his relief as he lets his forehead fall gently against mine.

For a long moment, he’s silent. He closes his eyes tightly and takes several deep breaths, and I continue to soothingly stroke my thumb back and forth across his cheek. Eventually he opens his eyes again and looks into mine, and the sadness I can see in them, while in no way unexpected, is devastating.

“I’m scared.” He admits so quietly that I almost didn’t hear him over the background noise in the bar. But I don’t really need to hear him say it when I can see it written all over his face.

“I know.” I tell him, lifting my forehead from his just long enough to lightly kiss the tip of his nose. It coaxes a flicker of a smile onto his lips, just for a second. “It’s okay.”
Chapter 35

Chapter Summary

Tommy Chapter!

I hate change.

Well… not all change. I’m all about changes that I’ve been planning for and working towards. It’s the ones I never agreed to that I have a problem with. The ones that sneak up and kick me in the junk when I’m least expecting it. This year has been full of changes like that; I’m kinda surprised my junk still functions at all anymore.

But even unexpected change is better than the threat of a potential change. At least when you don’t see it coming, you don’t have to spend indefinite amounts of time living in dread, wondering if this change you fear is ever going to happen.

I’ve experienced all three types of change this year, at least once each. Adam firing me was a definite kick in the gnads. Having another baby is something we’ve been planning for months. And my mom being sick…

Nothing has actually changed. Not yet, anyway. But it could. It could be one of the biggest changes
of my life, and I don’t know if it’s going to happen or not. It’s just sitting there, on the horizon, giving me the finger like a giant fucking douche bag. And there’s nothing I can do about it. I can’t ignore it, or make it go away. I don’t want to be afraid of it, it makes me feel like a total fucking loser to be afraid of it. But I am.

I’m terrified.

My dad died five years ago today.

I wasn’t there, I was on tour. I think the distance acted like a buffer or something. Not that it wasn’t painful, because it was excruciating. Eventually. At first it was kind of surreal. I was on a tour bus, not in a hospital. I could hear my sister sobbing on the other end of the phone, but I didn’t have to see her tears. Everyone in the band and on the crew was so worried about me when I told them, they were all hugging me and asking what they could do to help. They were watching me, waiting for a reaction, waiting for me to breakdown. But I didn’t.

I was numb.

I wish I was numb right now.

“Hey.” Taylor moves closer to me under the sheets, draping a sleepy arm across my stomach. “How long have you been awake?”

All night. “A few minutes.”

“Did you sleep okay?” He asks as he places a kiss on the bare skin of my shoulder.

“Think so.”

I don’t even know why I’m lying to him. It’s stupid. I’m stupid. I’m just gonna blame my stupidity on sleep deprivation. That’s a bullshit excuse, but it’s the best one I’ve got.

“I should probably start getting ready.” I sigh, shifting out from under the reassuring weight of his arm and instantly regretting it. “She’s supposed to check in at eight-thirty.”
“Okay, but first…” He grabs my wrist gently to stop me from getting off the bed. “I just want you to know that I’m here. Whatever you need. Even if what you need is for me to shut up. Just say the word.”

What I need right now is to crawl back under our bed sheets and hide there for the rest of today. But that’s not an option. So instead, I make the most of the last few seconds I get to spend in the safest place I know.

“You’re still coming to the hospital, right?”

“Of course.” He tugs gently on my hand, pulling me towards him. “As soon as the kids are taken care of.”

“I really don’t wanna do this.” Damnit, I sound like a fucking baby. “This is officially my least favorite day of the year. And not just this year. Every year.”

“I know.” He sympathizes as he kisses me softly, his thumb soothingly stroking my cheek. “But we’re already seven hours into it. And by the time you get to the hospital, we’ll be eight hours into it, which means one whole third of the day will be over.”

Despite how completely wretched I feel, I can’t help by smile at his attempts to calm my nerves and help me face this fucked up day. “Thank you.”

“Anytime. Math is kinda my specialty.”

Now that’s funny. But I can’t seem to find it in me to laugh right now, so throwing my pillow at his head is gonna have to do.

I don’t usually drag my feet getting ready in the mornings; I don’t have time to. And I don’t really have the time to do it today, either, but I’m pathetically desperate to put off leaving the house to head over to the hospital. In the end, I spend so long showering and getting dressed that I don’t have time for breakfast. Which is good, because I also don’t have an appetite. I know it’s stupid not to eat something, because I will get hungry at some point, and my only options are gonna be vending machine junk or hospital cafeteria food. But I seriously think I might throw up anything I try to eat right now.
Before leaving the house, I check the GPS on my phone to get directions to the hospital. I don’t really need directions, I know where it is, but I want to know where all of the traffic is on the way there. So I can make sure I get stuck in it.

Yup.

Pathetic.

I thought it was just Cedars-Sinai that I hated, but it turns out it’s all hospitals. Or maybe just hospitals where people I love are being treated for potentially life-threatening illnesses and injuries. It doesn’t matter how ‘homey’ Lisa tries to make this room feel by bringing in pictures and flowers and hand-made quilts, it’s still a hospital room, which means it’s still hell. I know she’s just trying to make mom feel more comfortable, and who knows, maybe it’s working. But to me it feels like she’s moving her in. Mom’s only supposed to be here for a couple of days after the surgery, she’s not staying indefinitely!

“Where should I hang this picture Bridget drew for you?” Lisa asks, glancing around the room for a prime spot on the wall. “If I put it over here, can you see it okay from the bed?”

Mom nods, and I can’t help but wonder if I’m the only one who thinks the smile on her lips is completely forced. Lisa seems oblivious. “It’s perfect.”

“Can I get you anything else? I know you can’t eat or drink anything before the surgery, but-”

“Actually, sweetheart, I forgot to pack something to read. Do you think you could run down to the gift shop and see if they have any books? Something by Nora Roberts, maybe?”

“Of course.” She checks her watch quickly, probably to make sure that it’s safe to leave the room for ten minutes without missing anything. Or maybe so she can time herself, because she’s being that ridiculous right now. “I’ll be right back.”

“No rush.”

Lisa’s already out of the room, so I doubt she heard mom’s plea for her take her sweet time at the gift
shop. And as glad as I am that the fussing has come to an end, at least for a few minutes, I suddenly realize that without Lisa bouncing around the room, re-arranging flowers and fluffing pillows, I’m alone with my mom for the first time since she told us she was sick.

This shouldn’t be awkward.

But it’s awkward.

“I thought she’d never leave.” I mumble semi-seriously, trying to kill the tension before it makes me wanna kill myself.

“Be nice to your sister.” She scowls at me playfully as she takes a seat on the edge of her hospital bed. “You know she’s just trying to stay busy.”

“I know. I just wish she’d find a less annoying way to do it.”

“Where’s Taylor? With the kids?”

I nod, slowly approaching the chair by her bed and taking a seat in front of her. “He’s dropping them off at camp and pre-school, and then he’ll be here. But…not before…”

“That’s probably for the best. The nurse said that they prefer patients only have one or two people with them before they go in for surgery. Otherwise it gets too chaotic.”

“Right. Makes sense.”

But if they think they’re gonna kick Taylor out of the waiting room when he gets here, they’re the ones who are gonna need surgery. The only reason I’m not as big of a mess as Lisa is right now is because I know Taylor will be here soon. If I didn’t have that thought to hold onto, I’d be freaking out. More than I already am.

And possibly even outside of the confines of my own head, which never ends well for anyone.
“Listen, before Lisa comes back, there’s something I need to talk to you about.” Mom tells me apprehensively, which does nothing to help me stay calm.

Neither does the apologetic look she’s giving me right now. “Okay…”

“I would’ve talked to you both, but I know she’s having a hard time with this already, and I don’t know if she can handle anything else.”

And I can?!

Fuck.

I should have bought her a houseplant and a personalized coffee cup, and spent the last hour rearranging her hospital room, too. Maybe then she wouldn’t think I’m capable of handling whatever it is she’s about to say.

“What is it?”

“I know it’s morbid, and more than likely unnecessary, but I didn’t want to leave anything to chance. So… if something happens, if something goes wrong… I put everything together in an envelope on the dining table—”

“Everything? What do you mean?”

“A copy of my will, my life insurance policy, retirement and bank account information—”

“Mom—”

“And I made you a list of names and phone numbers for people you’ll need to call.”

“I don’t…” I have to stop and take a deep breath to keep myself from being sick. I don’t want to hear this. “Nothing’s gonna happen. It’s just… surgery. It’ll be fine, they do this kind of thing all the time.”
“I know, and I’m sure you’re right.” She smiles faintly, leaning forwards and placing her hand over mine on the arm of the chair. “But just in case—”

“There is no ‘just in case’, okay?” I insist, pulling my hand out from under hers because it feels too much like she’s coddling me, and I don’t want to be fucking coddled.

If anyone should be coddled here, it’s her!

“Okay.”

Why am I sitting here right now?

Why is my mom about to be cut open? Why does she have a bunch of fucking tumors growing inside her? Why the hell does shit like this happen?! I don’t get it. There’s no point to it, no reason for it. She’s a good person. She’s healthy. She doesn’t smoke, she rarely drinks, she even has one of those dumbass treadclimber contraptions in her garage and she gets up early every morning to use it! It doesn’t make any sense, she’s the last person something like this should be happening to!

And the only fucking thing I can do about it is pretend it doesn’t bother me at all when she tells me where to find an envelope full of paperwork I’ll need if she dies today.

I didn’t prepare myself for her to die today.

I don’t think I’ve prepared myself for her to die ever, honestly, and I don’t fucking want to!

Thankfully, Lisa returns with a selection of novels for mom to choose from before I have a total meltdown and throw a fit like a child. I feel childish right now. I want to stomp my foot and demand to know ‘why’, the way Viggo does when we tell him no. Or sit in a corner with my arms crossed and scowl like Asta does when she can’t have what she wants. But someone somewhere decided I meet the requirements to be considered an adult, so now I have to fucking act like one.

I want my Taylor.
It’s not long before Lisa and I are shooed out of the room so that mom can be prepped for surgery, which leaves us with nothing to do but sit in the waiting room and pretend to read a bunch of magazines that were barely relevant when they were published five years ago. There’s no way I could even begin to focus on this shit anyway, not now. I can’t stop wondering if that was the last time I’ll ever see my mom alive. I wish she’d just left me a damn note about where to find her life insurance policy instead of bringing it up before they wheeled her off into the operating room. As scared as I’ve been about the possibility of losing her, it hadn’t crossed my mind that it might happen today. And now it’s all I can think about!

That is, until I get a text from Adam.

I wasn’t paying attention when I picked up my phone to look at the message, I just assumed it was Taylor telling me that he was on his way over. So when I see Adam’s name on the screen, I have to stare at my phone in confusion for a good long minute before I can read what it is he wrote.

_How’s it going?_

Dude.

_Seriously?_

Today’s the day he decides he wants to chat with me. _Today_?! What the fuck am I even supposed to say to him? I mean… _really_? I know he has no clue where I am or what I’m doing, but he couldn’t have picked a worse time for this if he’d tried.

_Ok. You?_

I don’t know why I replied.

I guess it’s something to do, at least, and I would’ve had to do it sooner or later anyway. Probably. I don’t know anymore. Do I owe him a reply? Do I _want_ to talk to him? And why the fuck does he suddenly want to talk to me? He’s had plenty of opportunities to contact me over the last few months, ad he could have tried to spend more time with me at his show in Morongo a few weeks ago, but he didn’t. He seemed pretty happy to just cut ties and pretend like we were never friends, so why the hell does he suddenly want to talk now?
Pretty good. Are you busy today?

The laugh escapes me before I can stop it, and Lisa immediately shoots me a look of disapproval. You know, just in case I wasn’t already aware of how completely inappropriate it was. But how else was I supposed to react to that question?

Am I busy today?

Nah. Just hanging out at the hospital while some surgeons carve my mom up. The usual.

Kind of. Why?

“What’s wrong?” Asks Lisa curiously.

“Nothing.”

She raises a skeptical eyebrow at me. “Then why are you frowning at your phone like Siri just asked you to solve an impossible math problem?”

“It’s… I just got a text from someone I hadn’t heard from in a while. It caught me off guard, that’s all.”

Usually she’d badger me for more information. She’d want to know who it was, and what they wanted, and how I feel about it. But she’s not exactly on top of her prying-big-sister game today, so she goes back to idly flipping through her magazine like nothing happened.

I was wondering if you wanna have lunch or get a drink later?

Why?

The last time he randomly texted me and asked me out for lunch after barely speaking to me for months, it was to fire me. What’s he gonna do this time? Re-hire me?
No thanks.

Can’t today. Sorry.

I consider typing ‘maybe another time’, but something keeps me from doing it. I guess I’m not sure I want there to be another time. Part of me feels like shit for shutting him down like that, especially when I have no idea why he wants to meet up. And the rest of me feels almost resentful of the fact that I feel guilty. I’m sure an unbiased third party would tell me I have nothing to feel guilty about. But there’s a stupid voice in my head telling me I owe him, no matter what has happened between us this year. He may have fired me, but he also gave me the job in the first place. So much of what has happened to me in the last six years wouldn’t have happened if I hadn’t had that job.

But does that mean he has unlimited Get Out Of Jail Free cards, and gets to jerk me around for the rest of my life?

“Hey.”

The sound of Taylor’s voice is like a sudden wave of calm washing away all of the bullshit, and I put my phone away without a second thought because I just don’t care anymore. He’s here, so even if things are far from perfect, they’re still better than they were thirty seconds ago.

“I brought coffee.” Of course he did. “And I know you didn’t eat anything before you left this morning, so I got you one of those bistro box things. You know, the ones you always pick up and poke fun at? ‘Lunchables for losers’.”

I probably look like I’m stoned or something right now, just staring at him and smiling while he roots around in the brown paper Starbucks bag he brought with him. But what else am I supposed to do? He’s fucking adorable. He got Lisa a soy latte and a like five different pastries because he wasn’t sure what kind she’d prefer. Of course the idea of texting one of us and asking never crossed his mind, because he was too busy trying to do any little thing he could think of to help. He didn’t have time to be smart about it.

“How’re you doing?” He asks quietly as he takes a seat beside me and sets the rest of his Starbucks haul down on the table in front of us.

“I don’t know.” I reply honestly. “Just kinda… here.”
“Yeah.”

“Thanks for the food, though. I was starting to get a little hungry.”

He smiles faintly, kissing me on the forehead and wrapping an arm around my shoulders. He smells clean, like shampoo, which is a much more comforting kind of clean than the overly sanitary smell of this hospital. I seriously just wanna like… curl up in his lap and go to sleep. It wouldn’t be the first time. But this probably isn’t the time or the place, so instead I pick up my over-priced food and try to figure out whether to start with the two-bite PB&J, the string cheese, or the chocolate covered raisins.

Another hour goes by, but it seems more like ten from where I’m sitting. I can’t feel my ass anymore, I don’t know where I end and this crappy chair begins. The only reason I’m even slightly comfortable is because I have Taylor to lean on. His shoulder is pretty much the best headrest ever. I feel bad for Lisa; she doesn’t have anyone to lean on. David had a business trip he couldn’t get out of, and she probably wouldn’t have let him cancel it even if he could have. We told her she could bring Bridget over to our place tonight if she wanted to, but she said she’d be fine. Maybe she’ll change her mind later, but I doubt it.

Trying to keep your shit together with no help from anyone is kind of a Ratliff family trait.

Out of nowhere, a cell phone starts to ring. The three of us are so surprised by it that we react as though someone set off an alarm. It’s like we were all sleeping with our eyes wide open or something. Even though I know it’s not my phone because it’s not a ringtone I have, I check anyway, and so does Taylor.

“It’s David.” Lisa tells us as she gets out of her seat and begins walking towards the hallway. “I’ll be right back, but text me if the doctor comes out.”

“Okay.”

“Don’t suppose she’s changed her mind about staying with us tonight?” Asks Taylor, and the hopeful tone of his voice brings a small smile to my lips.

“Nope.”
“That darn Ratliff stubborn streak strikes again, huh?”

“Oh, like you Hanson’s aren’t even a little pigheaded?” I retort mockingly.

“We prefer the term ‘headstrong’, thank you.”

“Whatever.”

I glance over at the clock on the wall across the room, and when I see that it has only been two hours since my mom went in for surgery, I become convinced that the damn clock needs its batteries replaced because it has to have been longer than that! But when I take my phone out of my pocket again to see the correct time, I find out that the clock on the wall is actually telling the truth.

This day is never gonna fucking end!

“We’re gonna be here forever.” I mutter miserably, sinking even lower in my seat. “We’re gonna die in these chairs.”

“I promise I won’t let that happen.”

“You might not be able to stop it. This is the day when fucked up things happen, no matter what you do. It’s like Friday the thirteenth but in the middle of the week.”

He takes my hand in his, entwining our fingers and holding on tightly. It’s like he’s physically trying to keep me from spiralling down into doom and gloom. “I know today sucks, and it’s always gonna suck. But nothing else fucked up is going to happen. Your mom is going to be fine.”

“You don’t know that. Even the surgeon doesn’t know that.”

“No, but… I believe it. And I believe that the longer the surgery takes, the better the outcome will be.” He assures me wholeheartedly.

“How do you figure that?”
“Because if it was over already, it would mean they couldn’t get as many of the tumors as they hoped. The longer it takes, the more they’re doing to help her, and the better the odds are that she’ll be okay.”

I hope he’s right.

“I’m really glad you’re here.” I sigh tiredly, laying my head back on his shoulder. “I’d probably be driving myself even crazier right now if you weren’t.”

“Well, it really doesn’t matter if you’re glad or not. I’d be here even if you begged me to leave. And if you tried to get away from me, I’d just follow you around the hospital all day. You’re never gettin’ rid of me.”

“I think it’s cute that you believe you have any kind of choice in whether you stay or not.”

“I don’t believe that.” He tells me, resting his head against mine and giving my hand another squeeze. “I’ve never really believed it.”

I used to believe it.

Once upon a time, in a galaxy way too close for comfort, I was under the idiotic impression that I could actually choose whether or not I was in his life. I thought I could walk away if I wanted to, or that I could force him to walk away. But every time it seemed as though we were over, we came right back to each other. Whether it took hours, days, weeks, or months, it didn’t matter; we couldn’t keep our distance.

It’s probably the only thing in my life that I’m thankful I’ll never be able to change.
It’s been five hours since she went in for surgery.

All things considered, I think I’ve been handling it pretty well. I’m not fidgeting in my seat incessantly the way I usually do when I’m anxious, which I’m sure Taylor appreciates because it drives him fucking nuts when I won’t stop jiggling my leg (he has no room to talk, though; he taps on every -fucking-thing when he’s nervous). But I’m nearing my limit here. I can only behave like a patient adult for so long before my resolve starts to crumble and my bratty side escapes.

And the longer this takes, the harder it is for me to think about anything besides that envelope sitting on my mom’s dining table.

“They’ll be done soon.” Taylor tells me knowingly, lacing his fingers with mine on the armrest of the chair.

I somehow manage to keep my mouth shut and not point out that he doesn’t know that. He’s only trying to help keep me calm, because he knows me well enough to know when I’m on the verge of
flipping out.

“...”

“I wish someone would give us a fucking update.”

“If them ignoring us means they’re one hundred percent focused on mom, I’d rather not hear anything until they’re done.” Lisa counters, her eyes still trained on the only entrance to the waiting room.

“I guess.”

My gaze follows her to the empty hallway across the room, and I silently will one of the doctors to round the corner and make their way over to us. I don’t even realize I’m squeezing Taylor’s hand harder and harder with every passing second until he makes a sound of discomfort. He doesn’t tell me to stop, though. If I wasn’t so worried right now, I’d be mocking him over the fact that he would sit there and let me break his fucking fingers if he thought it might make me feel better.

Well… I’d be mocking him, or kissing him. Maybe both. I’m not sure in what order.

When my mom’s surgeon finally does appear in the hallway, I find myself willing him to turn around and go away again. I’m afraid to hear what he has to say. I want him to tell us that they got every last cell of every last tumor out of her, and that after a little chemo she’ll be cancer free, and it’ll be like none of this ever happened. But I know the chances of that are almost zero. And the look on his face as he comes to a stop in front of us does nothing to reassure me.

“Well...” Lisa asks hopefully as she gets out of her seat.

“I have to use the arms of the chair to push myself up because I feel like I can’t do it without some kind of assistance. And even once I’m standing, I can’t bring myself to take a step closer. My legs just will not move.

“The surgery went well. Your mother is in recovery right now, and once she’s awake we’ll have her moved to her room and you can see her.” He tells us, still with that strained little smile on his lips. “Because of the number and size of the tumors in her ovaries and uterus, we performed a hysterectomy. It was something that we had discussed with her before the surgery, and she was aware that it was a distinct possibility. She’ll need to stay here for a few days, and then if she’s doing well we can send her home. But she’ll likely need a lot of help over the next couple of weeks while she’s recovering.”
“We’ll make sure she has everything she needs.” Lisa immediately assures him. “I can take some
time off of work.”

It feels as though everyone is suddenly looking at me, waiting for me to declare that I’m going to be
helpful, too. And I will be. I just… can’t seem to speak in order to say the words.

“We’ll definitely do whatever we can to help.” Taylor agrees on my behalf.

“What about the other tumors?” Presses Lisa. “She said that the scans you did showed that there
were more of them in her abdomen?”

The doctor takes a deep breath, and I feel an intense desire to do the same. “The cancer has
metastasized to the lining of the abdomen, her spleen, and lymph nodes. The tumors weren’t as
extensive as the ones in her ovaries and uterus, and we were able to resect most of them. With
chemotherapy, we hope to eliminate any remaining cancer cells.”

“So she’ll be okay?” I finally manage to ask. “You got most of it, and the chemo will get the rest,
and then she’ll be like… in remission or whatever?”

“Your mother’s cancer, while operable, is still at a more advanced stage—”

“What stage?” Lisa asks, trying to adopt her medical professional tone even though it’s blatantly
obvious that one wrong word from this guy is gonna wreck her. “Was it on her spleen or in her
spleen?”

“It was on—”

“That’s stage three, right? It’s not in any other organs, so it’s not stage four.”

I know enough about cancer to know that the higher the stage, the worse it is. And that four is pretty
much as bad as it gets…
“We’ve staged it as three. Her prognosis, at this point, is hard to determine. Patients at this stage generally have a fifty-fifty chance of recovery.” He tells her (way too solemnly for my liking). “Once she’s strong enough for chemotherapy, we’ll start her first course. It’s going to be a long road, but I believe her cancer is still very treatable.”

“Thank God.”

I’m about to ask him if ‘treatable’ and ‘curable’ are interchangeable terms here, but then I remember that there is no cure for cancer. Not really. Whatever caused her to get sick might get its ass kicked by chemo, but that doesn’t mean it won’t regroup and come back again. Or does it? It’s ovarian cancer and she doesn’t have any ovaries anymore, so it seems like it should be done. But people who have breast cancer and get mastectomies can still have the cancer come back somewhere else, so I’m assuming it’s possible it could happen to my mom, too.

I feel so totally fucking uninformed, and I hate myself for brushing Taylor off every time he tried to talk to me about all of this over the last couple of weeks. I know he’s been online researching ovarian cancer and educating himself on treatments, and staging, and what to expect. He could probably answer most of my questions right now if I had the guts to ask them.

But I don’t.

It’s not too long before we’re allowed to go back to mom’s room and visit with her. The second I set foot in the room and see her lying there, a little voice in my head says ‘nope’, and it makes me want to turn around and walk out again. She hasn’t been in hospital even once since I was born, not as a patient. I’ve never seen her look so pale or so weak. I try to tell myself that she’ll be okay tomorrow, she’ll have more color and she won’t seem so frail. But it doesn’t matter if she looks better tomorrow. She’s still got weeks of recovery ahead of her, not to mention weeks of chemotherapy after that...

She’s going to be sick and sore indefinitely, so I should probably get the fuck over how nauseous it makes me feel to see her this way.

We spend the next hour or so sitting around her bedside, asking her if she needs anything whenever she opens her eyes for more than a few seconds. It’s pretty pointless, really. She’s barely aware of our presence and there’s nothing we can do for her that the nurses aren’t already doing. But the idea of leaving her feels wrong.

I left my dad.
I thought he was going to be okay, and he was being well taken care of, so I left. And then he died, and I wasn’t even in the fucking state when it happened.

Taylor knows I still have way too many regrets in that department, so he doesn’t push me to leave with him when it’s time to get the kids from camp. All he asks is that I get something to eat at some point in the near future. He offers to pick Bridget up from pre-school so Lisa can stay, too, and I can tell from the conflicted expression on her face that she really wants to take him up on it. But she insists that she’ll be fine doing it herself, and eventually she says her goodbyes, too.

Then it’s just me and mom, and the next thing I know, I’m falling asleep in the chair beside her bed.

It’s pretty late when I wake up. Or when I’m woken up, I should say. The nurse shakes me awake to inform me that visiting hours will be over in five minutes. I’m surprised to find mom wide awake when I rub my tired eyes and turn to look at her. She tries to smile for me, but it’s obvious that she’s in pain.

“How’re you feeling?”

“A little uncomfortable.” She lies. “But I’ll be okay.”

“Has the doctor talked to you?” I ask uncertainly, wondering how much she knows about the extent of the surgery. I really don’t wanna be the one to tell her that she has fewer organs now than she did when she came in here this morning.

“A little while ago. He said everything went well.”

“Yeah.”

“How are you?” She frowns worriedly. “You shouldn’t have stayed here all this time, you’re obviously tired.”

“I’m fine.” I guess we’re both liars now. “I just… didn’t want you to wake up and have no one here. I didn’t mean to fall asleep.”
“You must have needed it.”

“I guess.”

“And they’re going to make you leave now anyway, so you have no excuse not to go home and sleep in a bed instead of a chair.”

“Do you want me to bring you anything tomorrow?” I ask as I get out of my seat and walk over to her. “I can bring you my iPad and you can watch Netflix?”

“If you want.”

Meaning “sure, bring me your iPad if it makes you feel better, but I probably won’t use it”.

“Okay… well… I guess I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Okay, sweetie.”

I lean down to kiss her gently on the cheek, and I’m hyper aware the entire time of where my hands are in relation to any IV or wire nearby. “Call if you think of anything else you need.”

“I will.”

Even though I know I have to leave or risk being forcibly removed, it doesn’t make it any easier to walk out of the room. And it doesn’t help that as soon as I try to go, she calls me back.

“What? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” She quickly assures me. “I just wanted to tell you that I’m sorry for this morning.”

“What about it?” I frown.
“I shouldn’t have mentioned anything about the paperwork or put any kind of doubts in your mind. I didn’t mean to put you in that position or make you worry even more than you already were.”

“Oh.” Shit. I’d kinda forgotten about that. “Well... it doesn’t matter now anyway. You’re gonna be alright.”

“I’m still sorry.”

“Forget about it.”

I sure as hell intend to try, because not thinking about it is way better for my emotional well being.

But not thinking about it, and not having to be as worried about mom as I have been all day, means that my mind is free to start wandering to other subjects instead. And, of course, the first thing that comes to mind is that out-of-the-blue text from Adam. I know I told him I was too busy to see him today, and when I said it I meant it. But I’m not busy anymore, and if I go home now there’s a good chance I’m going to be wondering about the reason for his random text for the rest of the evening.

On the way to my car, I send him a message telling him that I’m free if he still wants to get together, and it hardly seems like my own text has had chance to go through before he very enthusiastically replies to tell me that he is. We send a few more messages back and forth to arrange a time and place, and then I send one to Taylor telling him that I’m okay, that I’m going to see Adam, and not to wait up. He calls me on the drive over to the bar where I’m meeting Adam to interrogate me about the whole thing, but I can’t answer any of his questions because I’m just as clueless as he is about why Adam contacted me. In the end he has no choice but to wish me luck and let me go.

I never used to get nervous meeting Adam for a drink or a meal. I had no reason to. He was my friend, he didn’t invite me out just to give me bad news, so I never associated our get togethers with anything negative. Funny how one experience can totally change the way you relate to someone. Ninety-nine times, everything was fine. But that one time it was shit is the one that stuck with me. I want to give him the benefit of the doubt and believe that this is nothing to be anxious about, but I refuse to let my guard down until I know for sure.

I still can’t think of anything he’d suddenly want to talk to me about. The only possible thing I can come up with is that he randomly remembered that it’s the anniversary of my dad’s death today and wanted to check in. But he easily could have checked in via text instead. And it doesn’t add up, anyway, because not only has he never made a thing of this day any other year, but he hasn’t
bothered to check in with me at all about anything for months now.

I feel like I’m going in blind.

The bar is familiar, at least. Though that fact isn’t as much of a comfort as I was hoping it would be. I make my way through the bustling crowds, dodging frazzled waitresses and annoyingly boisterous guys who are trying way too hard to impress each other (and anyone else who happens to hear them). It feels as though everyone is watching me as I pass, like they’re all in on some joke and I’m the only one in the room who isn’t.

Probably because I’m the fucking punchline.

Adam is waiting for me in a booth near the back of the bar, just like his text said, and there’s a Pabst waiting for me on the table. He’s smiling brightly at me, and I know I should probably reciprocate, or at least look him in the eyes. But I keep my gaze trained on my beer as I take my seat opposite him.

“Hey.” He greets me cheerfully, though I’m pretty sure I hear a hint of uneasiness in his voice. It’s probably bad that it makes me feel better.

“Hey.” I force myself to look up at him, just for a second, long enough to fake a smile before picking up my beer to distract myself. “Thanks for the drink.”

“No problem.”

Aaaand… awkward silence.

This is going to be fun.

“So…” He takes a long, deep breath, and I internally cringe as I wait for him to initiate some painful, pointless small talk. “How’s… everything?”

“Everything? That’s… a lot of stuff. Anything specific you wanna hear about?”
I didn’t mean for it to come out like it did, so snarky and bitter, and I can tell from the way his smile falters that it sounded as bad to him as it did to me. “Uh… no. Just… everything. Anything.”

“So…” I ask bluntly, leaving him shaking his head in confusion. “I mean, why now? Why do you suddenly wanna sit down and catch up today?”

“It’s not ‘suddenly’.” He sighs. “I’ve been meaning to do this ever since we saw each other backstage at the casino show a few weeks ago, but… I’ve been busy.” Too busy to text me? I call bullshit. “I actually wanted to ask you if you wanted to get a drink after the show that night.”

“But…?”

He shrugs uncomfortably as he stares down into his drink. “I just… didn’t wanna take away from your time with Taylor and your friends.”

“Look, Adam, I appreciate the gesture or whatever, but it’s been a really long day, so if there’s a point to this-”

“I just wanted to make sure you were doing okay. That we’re good, you know?”

I can’t decide if I want to punch him or not. Not that I would. But I feel like I would be justified if I did. He’s sitting here, staring at me with those big blue eyes of his, giving me the most sincere, heartfelt look he can probably muster. It’s like he thinks he’s doing me a fucking favor or something by caring enough to check in and make sure we’re ‘good’.

Five fucking months after the fact.

“Would that make you feel better?”

He frowns as he slowly shakes his head. “I don’t understand… would what make me feel better?”

“Hearing me say we’re good, so you can walk away clean.” I reply, causing my inner nice-guy to practically flinch at the scathing tone of voice I used.
But I’m so far beyond caring if I’m nice to him or not. Maybe I am gonna wind up being the bad guy in all of this, maybe I’m an idiot for slapping this olive branch out of his hand. But it doesn’t look like an olive branch from where I’m sitting. It looks like his guilty conscience disguised as concern for my wellbeing. And if he thinks I’m going to kiss it and make it better, he’s an idiot.

“That’s not why I’m here.” Maybe he’s as genuine as he sounds, but it’s pretty hard for me to believe. His actions, or his inaction, speaks louder than words.

“You didn’t seem all that concerned about whether or not I was okay before today.”

“I…” His shoulders rise and fall in a helpless shrug as he struggles to think of a way to explain why he hasn’t been in contact before now. Because there is no way to explain it, not a way that absolves him of any wrong-doing, not as far as I’m concerned. “I’m sorry, Tommy. I didn’t mean for you to think that-”

“What the hell else was I supposed to think?”

“I was just busy with work.” He maintains earnestly. “It wasn’t personal.”

Wrong answer, Adam.

“Maybe not to you.” I mutter, pushing my beer aside as I begin to get out of my chair to leave.

I really just wanna walk the fuck out on him right now. I don’t want to hear him defend himself, it’s only gonna piss me off more. But just as I’m about to turn my back and leave, something stops me.

It’s the urge to unload on Adam everything I’ve been thinking and feeling for the past year.

At first, I resist. It’s not who I am or how I handle this kind of thing. I talk a good game, I paint myself as someone who refuses to take shit from anyone, who gives zero fucks, who says whatever the hell is on my mind. But really, deep down, I’m not that guy. I openly bitch about some things, things that don’t really matter all that much, but when it comes to the big stuff I tend to keep it to myself. I’ve been screwed over before, and no matter how badly I might want to say something about it… I don’t. I let the other person walk away without telling them how much they fucking suck
. And then I find a way to make it my fault that they treated me like shit; I tell myself I deserved it for some reason.

But I know I didn’t deserve this.

I take my seat again, my heart pounding as I ball my hands into fists to keep them from shaking with nerves. I hate telling people off, especially people I care about, but I hate being a doormat even more. Any other day, I might have just sat here and let him make excuses for his absence in my life, I would have told him it was okay even though it really wasn’t. He would have gone home feeling like a weight had been lifted, while I would have left this bar feeling worse than I did when I came in.

But not today.

Today, I don’t have it in me to keep my mouth shut so that he can feel good about himself.

Today, I’m done.

“You know what? I don’t give a shit that you fired me. That’s your prerogative. And I don’t care whether you actually tried to convince your label to keep me on, or you just rolled over and let them tell you to cut me loose. Hell, I don’t even really care if it was entirely your choice. You’re right, it wasn’t personal, it was business. You weren’t obligated to keep me on just because we were friends, and it wasn’t your responsibility as my ex-boss to worry about how I handled being axed. But it was your responsibility as my friend to show some fucking concern for how I felt.”

“I know.” He sighs sadly, ashamedly.

“I don’t wanna hear about how ‘busy’ you are. You wanna talk about being busy? I have five fucking kids, Adam. And I just spent all fucking day sitting in a hospital waiting room while my mom had surgery.”

His eyebrows knit together tightly in genuine concern. “What? Why? What’s wrong?”

“She has cancer.”
“Shit… Tommy… is she gonna be okay?”

“No idea. It’s pretty bad, but… we’re hoping they got it in time. And if you’d actually made an effort to stay friends with me, maybe you would’ve known that. Maybe you would’ve known what I’d been doing all day, and how fucking shitty I feel right now, and that this was the last thing I needed. But you didn’t. You stopped caring a long time ago, and maybe I should have, too. Maybe it’s my own damn fault that I took this so hard, maybe I should have written you off months ago the way you wrote me off.”

“I didn’t write you off, Tommy, I swear.”

“Then where the fuck were you? Do you even realize that the last time we actually spoke in person, before you fired me, was right before you left on tour with Queen? That was a year ago! It was like one Adam went on that tour and a totally different one came back, ’cause the Adam I knew returned calls and didn’t let months go by without at least sending a fucking text. And I’ve been trying to figure out what the hell I did to make you cut me out of your life like that. I know it wasn’t getting married or becoming a dad, ’cause you have plenty of friends with kids and you don’t ignore them. So what was it? What did I do?”

“You didn’t do anything.” He tells me, holding my stare without so much as blinking, trying to convince me to buy what he’s selling. “I’m sorry you thought it was your fault, because it wasn’t.”

“So... why? Why did we go from being family to being nothing?”

“I... don’t know.”

That’s got to be the worst answer he could have given me. Because it’s not a fucking answer. I mean, it’s one thing to say ‘I don’t know’ when someone asks you what you want for dinner. But when they ask you why you’ve been giving them the silent treatment for a year, ‘I don’t know’ doesn’t cut it!

“Well if you figure it out, give me a call.” I mumble as I stand from my seat once again. “I’d be interested to know. If you’re not too busy.”

“Tommy…”

I’m so mad at myself for coming here.
This was so not what I needed after the day I’ve had. I could’ve been at home with Taylor and the kids, but no. I wanted to see what Adam had to say, I wanted answers. If I’d known I wasn’t going to get any, that the only reason he wanted to see me was to clear his conscience, I wouldn’t have fucking bothered.

Damn, I wish I’d finished that beer he bought me. I am way too sober right now. But I guess at least that means I can drive, which means I can get the hell out of here and buy myself something a lot stronger to drink.

I’m definitely gonna need it after this shit show of a day.

But while I’m at the liquor store picking myself up a bottle of whiskey, I get a call from Adam. My gut instinct is to decline the call, shove my phone in my pocket, and pretend it never happened. And at first, that’s exactly what I do. Until I get back to my car, and then I see that he left a voicemail. I know that if I don’t listen to it now, it’s going to be nagging at me all night. Of course, there’s always the chance that whatever he says will nag at me, too. So if I’m screwed either way, I may as well just get it over with.

“There was no good reason. I fucked up. I got really busy, and I never had time to reply to your texts as soon as I got them, or answer your calls. But then I’d forget about it completely until the next time you texted or called me. It just got to the point where I felt so bad about how many times I’d forgotten to get back to you, I didn’t know what to say. And then you stopped texting me, and... it was easier to just let it go. I know that makes me a total jerk, and I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to disappear on you. I shouldn’t have done that. You deserved more than that. And I should have put up more of a fight with the label when they said I needed a new band. But I didn’t want to rock the boat when everything was finally going so well and the album was so close to coming out. And I really did think it would be easier on you to not have to leave Taylor and the kids to tour with me again. I’m sorry that I didn’t handle it better. And I’m sorry that I haven’t made an effort to contact you since. I guess I felt guilty about how everything went down and I didn’t know what to say. But that’s no excuse. I should have just said I was sorry for being such a shitty friend. So I’m saying it now. I hope it’s not too late.”

Is it too late?

The part of me that’s still angry with him says yes. The part that still misses him says no. The one thing they can both agree on is that I need a fucking drink.

The house is dark and quiet when I get home, which is a relief. If Taylor and the kids are all in bed, there’s nothing and no one standing between me and my bottle of whiskey. I make a beeline for the
kitchen to get myself a glass, even though I kinda want to forgo one altogether and just pour the contents of this bottle straight down my throat. I don’t even bother turning on the light as I step into the room; I don’t need it to find what I’m looking for, and being in the dark feels better right now. Safer.

I’ve just retrieved a glass from the cupboard and unscrewed the bottle cap when the room is flooded with light. I instinctively squeeze my eyes shut for a moment to block it out, but eventually I have to open them again and turn to face Taylor.

“Are you okay?”

“No.”

“How’d it go?” He asks gently, taking a step closer as I give a dismissive shrug and return to my previous task. “That well, huh?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t decided yet.” I sigh, pouring the whiskey into the glass until it’s way past the point where I would usually stop.

When I reach out to pick up my drink, Taylor’s hand appears out of nowhere and covers mine. There’s nothing forceful about the hold he has on me, which makes it clear that he’s not trying to stop me. That’s the only reason I’m able to avoid taking my exhaustion and frustration out on him.

“I know today sucked. And I know there’s nothing I can say or do to make you feel better right now.” He tells me sympathetically, tugging gently on my hand until I reluctantly turn around again. “If you want me to stay, I’ll stay. If you want to be alone, I’ll go back to bed. Either way, I’m here. And I love you.”

He draws me nearer, placing the lightest of kisses to my lips.

And just like that, I don’t want a drink anymore.

I don’t need one, and I feel like a fucking idiot for seeking meaningless comfort from a bottle of liquor when I could have simply crawled into bed with him and felt infinitely better in a heartbeat. I should know better by now.
I do know better.

This is probably gonna sound totally strange, but... my alcohol consumption has gone way down since Taylor moved to Los Angeles. And it’s not about setting a good example for the kids or being healthy. Those are just bonuses. It’s because I don’t feel like I need it. As long as I have Taylor, I don’t need to use alcohol to feel good or to numb myself anymore. One kiss from him can soothe even the most painful emotional wounds. Being with him doesn’t erase or undo days like today, but it sure as hell makes them bearable. It doesn’t matter what happens, or how bad things get, as long as I have him to come home to, I know I can handle it.

Growing up I always assumed that I would get married and have kids, because most people do. But the older I got, the less and less likely it seemed. I never met anyone I could imagine spending my whole life with. I never met anyone I could imagine spending an entire fucking year with! I couldn’t even see it when I was with Liz, and that was by far the longest relationship I’d ever had.

I think part of me just kinda… gave up.

I tried reassuring myself that it’d happen eventually. But deep down, in that black soul of mine, the only future I could clearly see for myself was a pretty bleak one. It involved a lot of whiskey. And a lot of facial hair, because obviously I wasn’t going to give enough of a fuck about anything to be bothered with my appearance. I was convinced that I was doomed to watch every last one of my friends find love and start a family, and I was gonna end up old, and empty, and resentful. If I did get married, I would find a way to fuck it up and wind up divorced. If I had kids, they’d be ashamed of me because I was just some washed up wannabe musician.

I would become that relative that people would invite over for family holidays out of a sense of obligation, while secretly hoping they wouldn’t show up because they’d just get drunk and insult everyone at the dinner table and then pass out on the couch. And lucky for them, I probably wouldn’t have accepted their pity invite, because I wouldn’t have wanted to be around all that cheerful family bullshit.

Hell, I was gonna be the kind of asshole who wouldn’t even fucking RSVP to let people know I wouldn’t be coming!

I tried not to think about it, but that cantankerous old jackass felt more and more familiar with every failed relationship and every birthday spent single.
And then Taylor came along…

Obviously, it wasn’t as simple as me knowing he was it and having that depressing future I’d envisioned disappear in an instant. In fact, falling in love with him made me even more convinced that I was headed for a life of loneliness. Because he was married. The first person I’d ever been in love with, and he was already taken!

Until he wasn’t.

Until he was mine.

And now I don’t know what I’d do without him.

I once told him that my feelings for him made me feel like a drug addict. Being without him for even the shortest periods of time drove me totally fucking insane. Being with him was pure relief from every shitty thing going on in my life. I’ve never done any hard drugs, so I couldn’t know for sure, but I likened having sex with him to getting high.

I still feel that relief when we’re together, but I no longer feel like some out of control addict who can’t fucking breathe if he’s not inside me.

And I think that might be even scarier, honestly.

Because I am still an addict. I’m just an addict who can get high whenever the fuck he wants to. It’s like I’m hooked on oxy or something, but I have a prescription with endless refills so I never have to worry about running out of pills. Every now and again, though, it hits me that someday that prescription might run out. My endless supply of pain relief could be gone. And in those moments, when that realization knocks the breath out of my lungs, all I want to do is see him, touch him, cling to him.

Just like I’m doing right now.

If I ever lost him... there wouldn’t be enough whiskey in the world to numb that pain.
“What’re you thinking about?” He murmurs against my ear, kissing the corner of my jaw and pulling the thin bed sheets a little higher over our tangled bodies. “I feel like you’re… somewhere else.”

“I go first.” I blurt out unthinkingly, turning my face towards his so that I can look him in the eyes.

I don’t blame him for being completely bewildered by my demand; it wasn’t the most eloquent thing I’ve ever said to him. “You go where first? Or do you mean like… you get to do something before me?”

“Yeah. I get to die before you.”

“What?” He laughs softly, apprehensively. “What’re you talking about?”

“You have to promise.” I insist seriously. “I don’t wanna spend a single second in a world that doesn’t have you in it somewhere, so you have to promise me that you won’t die before I do.”

“Tommy-”

“I know what you’re gonna say. You’re gonna tell me that this is a stupid fucking conversation because neither of us is dying anytime soon, and that you can’t promise me you won’t die before I do because you don’t know that-”

“Exactly!”

“And I don’t give a shit. Just… say it.”

I hold his sorrowful stare, willing him to say the words, even if they’re completely meaningless. I’m not stupid, I know that neither of us knows what’s ahead. No one does. But for some reason having him make me this pointless promise feels vitally important. I need it.

“What about me?” He questions sadly, brushing some sex-tousled hair away from my eyes. “I don’t wanna be here without you, either.”
Hearing the heartache in his tone makes me feel lousy. I can’t help but put myself in his place and imagine how it would have felt if he’d been the one to beg me to make the same promise. It wasn’t just a stupid request, it was a totally fucking selfish one, too.

I guess there’s really only one way to make this fair for both of us.

“We could go together?”

A small, sad smile faintly curls his lips as shifts nearer to me under the sheets, wrapping his arms around me protectively. Possessively.

“Deal.”
Ever since I was a kid, I’ve always made an effort to stop and appreciate not only the big moments, but the little ones, too. The vast majority of my life so far has been chaos, in one form or another. That’s not a bad thing; I thrive on it. But with everything always being so hectic, and time flying by at an unfathomable rate, it’s easy to overlook the small, seemingly insignificant moments that actually make up my life. That make it *worth* living.

I’m not claiming that I’m always successful when it comes to pressing pause. It’s something I have to constantly remind myself to do, usually *after* I realize that I wasn’t paying enough attention when something special happened. And by special, I don’t mean things like Viggo hitting a homerun at his softball game, or Penny performing a flawless routine at her dance recital, or Tommy playing a new song for me as soon as he’s done recording it. There’s *no* way I wouldn’t be paying attention to those things. I’m talking about the way Ezra reads Dr. Seuss books to Asta in the car sometimes when she’s getting cranky and won’t stop complaining about having to stay in her car seat. Or the crazy little victory dance that River does whenever something “awesome” happens.

Or this moment, right here.

Dia’s been out of the hospital for a little over a week now. The emotional exhaustion of being stuck at home all day, every day, is probably taking more of a toll on her than any of the physical aspects of recovery. She can’t do as much for herself as she usually can, and she doesn’t have the energy to go out, or to visit with the kids for very long, or even to put a little makeup on.

So Tommy is doing it for her.
He’s doing Penny and Asta’s makeup, too, because they insisted. Penny is a pro at picking out subtle, classy eyeshadow and lipstick shades, having watched Natalie do it for years. Asta, on the other hand, is... quite possibly color blind, based on her makeup choices. She looks kinda like the Bride of Chucky by the time Tommy is done with her. I’m pretty sure that wasn’t intentional on his part, but I’m not ruling it out. And it doesn’t matter either way; it’s making Dia smile, and that was the whole point.

It’s just the latest in a long line of simple but incredibly sweet moments I’ve witnessed between Tommy and Dia since her surgery. He may not be one for words, but everything he’s done for her this past week has made it abundantly clear how much he loves her. And I know she knows it, too. I can see it in the way she looks at him when he’s not looking at her. Even when he’s teasing her, or making inappropriate comments about her inability to do things for herself, it’s there.

With everything that’s been going on in our lives recently, it’s become more and more apparent to me just how important it is to pay attention to the little things. I’ve started taking my camera pretty much everywhere with me, even if it’s just to the grocery store. Because if it’s one of those trips where Penny decides to give Asta a piggyback down the cereal aisle, or River tries to balance a pear on his head, I want to make sure I can document it. I know that probably sounds silly. If I photographed every cute thing my kids did, I’d have more pictures than I’d know what to do with. But I’ll worry about that later. Right now, it feels important to make sure I commit as many of these moments to film as possible.

“How do I look?” Dia asks me somewhat dubiously.

“Beautiful.”

She shakes her head at me and narrows her eyes in disapproval. “You’re a terrible liar.”

“True. But I’m not lying.” I assure her. “He did a good job.”

“Thank you!” Tommy exclaims in exaggerated offense. “I do know what I’m doing.”

“I know you do, honey. But my makeup style is a little more…understated, compared to yours.”

“Dude, it’s not like I gave you the full ‘stage glam’ makeover.”
“What do you think, girls?” She asks Penny and Asta, who barely glance up from the hand mirror they’re admiring their own makeup in.

“You look like a princess.” Asta tells her. “I look like a princess, too!”

I don’t know which princess she thinks she looks like. But I love that her self-esteem is that high, so I’m not saying a damn word about it. Dia seems a little horrified by Asta’s comment, and she quickly turns to me and murmurs “I don’t look like that, do I?” It’s almost impossible to keep myself from laughing out loud as I emphatically shake my head.

“Tommy, can you do my makeup again tomorrow?” Penny requests in a the sugary sweet tone she always uses when she wants something from either of us.

“Sure.”

“Before camp?”

“Hell no.”

She immediately turns to me, fixing me with her most sorrowful gaze. I don’t know why she thinks she stands a better shot at getting a yes out of me if Tommy already said no. He’s usually the last resort, not me!

“Sorry. No wearing makeup out of the house until high school. Not unless it’s Halloween.”

“That’s so unfair! All the other girls wear makeup!”

“Really?” I ask, raising a skeptical eyebrow at her. “All the other ten year old girls at camp wear makeup?”

She heaves an extremely dramatic sigh as she folds her arms across her chest in contempt. “It’s just makeup! Why do you always have to make everything a big deal when it’s not?”
“Because they’re men, sweetheart.” Dia explains simply, leaving Tommy and I staring at her in open mouthed indinance. “And you’re their little girl, and it’s their job to try to keep you from growing up. No matter how pointless it is.”

“But I want to grow up!”

“And you will. Just...like... slooowly.” Tommy tells her, earning himself an unimpressed scowl. “You’ll thank us for it one day.”

Apparently she doesn’t intend to dignify that comment with a response, she merely sticks her nose in the air and flounces her way over to watch TV with her brothers. It’s not like I want to hold her back from doing any of the things that other girls her age are doing. Not much, anyway. But I honestly don’t believe that all the other girls her age are wearing blush and eyeliner to school.

Maybe that’s naive of me. And maybe it’s wrong of me to want to keep my little girl from becoming one of those L.A. pre-teens who aimlessly wanders the mall every Saturday in a crop top and booty shorts....

But if wanting my kid to remain a kid for as long as possible is wrong, I don’t wanna be right!

“Could one of you help me up?” Asks Dia, and I barely bother making a move to get out of my seat because I know that Tommy will already be on it before I can even stand up. “I can’t wait until I can get out of a chair on my own again.”

“Yeah, well don’t push it.” He warns her, offering her an arm to steady herself as she gets out of her seat. “If you go and hurt yourself, it’ll take you even longer to get back on your feet... so to speak.”

“Oh, don’t fuss.”

“He was the same way with me when I broke my leg.”

“And if I hadn’t been, you probably would’ve gone and broken your arm, or your other leg.” He points out. “You were like the worst patient ever.”
“I’ll try not to steal the title.” Dia tells me, forcing a small smile to hide her discomfort as she makes her way out of the room.

I remember smiling that same smile, trying to convince everyone around me that I wasn’t in as much pain as I was. I don’t know what it is that drives us to pretend that we’re okay when we’re not, especially when we have people around us who want to take care of us and who would understand if we admitted to how utterly shitty we really felt. Maybe it’s pride. Or maybe it’s just the backwards world we live in telling us to suck it up and push through the pain, be it physical or emotional.

Too often we’re led to believe that asking for help is weakness, and accepting help when it’s offered is giving up. I bought into that for most of my life, I felt like I had to handle everything myself. It took a long time for me to let someone else carry some of the weight for me, and even longer for me to be okay with it.

Now I can’t imagine it any other way.

“I wanna tell her about the baby.” Tommy announces out of nowhere.

“Are you sure?” I ask in surprise. “I thought you wanted to wait.”

“Until when, though? I mean, we can wait until Shauntae is pregnant, but everyone says you’re not supposed to tell people until after the first trimester, which means it could be like four months, at least, until we can tell anyone anything.” He shakes his head sadly as he stares at the empty chair his mom was sat in only moments ago. “She needs something now, something to look forward to, so when she thinks about the next few months she sees more than just pain, and doctors, and hospitals...”

It’s not something I need a moment to consider, because there’s nothing to think about. He’s right; Dia does need to see something good on the horizon, even if it isn’t guaranteed yet. Besides, I’ve been dying to tell more people about this ever since we met Shauntae!

“Okay.” I smile, reaching out for his hand and tugging him gently towards me. The hopeful little smile that begins to form on his lips makes me feel even more certain of the decision we’ve just made. It also makes it impossible to resist kissing him. “Let’s tell her.”

“Really?”
“Really.”

His hopeful smile morphs into an almost giddy grin. I think it might actually be the happiest I’ve seen him in weeks. He’s been understandably anxious about Dia’s diagnosis and her surgery, and I know that seeing her struggling through these early days of her recovery has been hard on him, too. It doesn’t matter how much of a brave face he might put on in front of her and the kids, when it’s just to two of us alone in our room at the end of the day, he lets the mask drop. To say that it’s heartbreaking to see him so worn down and afraid would be putting it mildly. It’s probably the hardest thing I’ve ever had to watch him go through, and there’s only so much I can do to make him feel better.

I’d give anything to make it all go away. Not only for him, but for Dia and Lisa, too.

I know this isn’t news to anyone, but cancer fucking sucks.

“Daddy, are we gonna have lunch soon?” Viggo whines, kneeling on the armchair he was sitting in so that he can see us over the back of it. “I’m starving!”

“Soon, buddy. We just wanna talk to Dia a little longer, then we’ll go get lunch.”

“*How* soon?” He questions suspiciously. Because even a six-year-old knows that ‘soon’ means nothing when you live on Hanson time.

“Twenty minutes. Thirty, tops.” I promise him.

It’s not a promise I intended to break. Then again, that’s been true of pretty much every broken promise I’ve ever made. And under normal circumstances, there’s every chance I would have been able to keep my word and get our hungry kids to a restaurant long before their grumbling stomachs became plain old grumbling. But I forgot to factor in Dia’s much slower than usual pace. And it’s not even the kids getting fidgety in the end, it’s Tommy. It might be funny if I didn’t know that it came from a place of concern rather than impatience. I feel bad physically holding him back from going to check on her, but I keep reminding myself that it’s better for both of them. Because I’m convinced that she’s okay, and that having people knocking on the bathroom door and reminding her that they’re worrying about her isn’t going to boost her already flagging morale.

But there’s nothing I can do to stop him from practically jumping out of his seat the second the
bathroom door opens, and hurrying over to escort her back to her chair. And she knows it’s pointless
telling him that she’s okay, or that she doesn’t need the help. Even if she could convince him that she
doesn’t need him to lean on while she walks across the room, I’m ninety-nine percent sure he’d still
follow her the whole way just in case.

“You two really don’t have to hang around here all day keeping me entertained.” She grimaces in
discomfort as she carefully lowers herself back into her seat. “I’m sure the children don’t want to be
cooped up inside all day.”

“They’ve been running around at camp all week.” Tommy tells her dismissively. “They need to get
used to being cooped up all day so it’s not a total shock to the system when they have to go back to
school.”

“Still, I doubt this is how you want to be spending your weekend.”

“I’m unemployed. My whole life is one giant weekend.”

“Tommy-”

“Don’t worry, we’ll stop bugging the crap out of you soon. We just have to tell you something first.”
He cuts her off, turning to me for reassurance that it’s still okay to go through with this and that I
haven’t had second thoughts at some point in the last ten minutes.

“We kinda have some big news.”

Her brow furrows in concern as her eyes shift back and forth between the two of us, trying to
decipher our expressions and deduce whether or not this is good news or bad news. So I try my best
to smile widely enough to put her mind at ease (but not so widely that I look deranged).

“What is it? What’s the big news?” She asks apprehensively. “You’re not moving, are you?”

“No, nothing like that.” I quickly reassure her. “We’re not going anywhere.”

“In fact… we’re hoping there’ll be more of us around here soon.”
“More of…” Dia shakes her head in confusion, failing to understand what it is that Tommy is trying to tell her. But she stops, freezes, when it finally clicks. “Wait… are you talking about having a baby?”

“We’re not talking about it, we’re doing it. Or trying to.” He smirks as her eyes grow wider by the second. “We have a surrogate and a donor, and they’ve already started doing fertility treatments and stuff, so…”

“Hopefully, by this time next month, they’ll be able to do the egg transfer.”

“But… but you said you decided against it. You said it wasn’t the right time.”

“Yeah, well… turns out we were wrong.” Tommy reaches out and squeezes her hand gently. “It was actually a pretty perfect time.”

I’m not even sure she believes us, she seems almost afraid to let herself accept that this is really happening. And I understand why. Until recently, she had basically no hope that she would ever get to see another grandchild running around her backyard. And then when she thought for a second that it might happen, we were forced to crush her dreams by telling her that we had no plans to have more kids in the foreseeable future. And now we’re sitting here taking back what we said only a month ago.

“You’re not joking, are you? This isn’t some kind of trick?”

“Of course it’s not a fucking trick!” Tommy immediately glances over his shoulder at the kids as soon as he realizes what he has just said, but they’re too absorbed in the TV show they’re watching to care about our boring, grown up conversation.

This is usually when Dia would chastise him for cussing. But either she doesn’t have the energy or she’s still too stunned to think straight, because she merely stares at us in silence. I don’t know whether to laugh or continue trying to convince her that this is really happening.

“So… you’re really having a baby?”
“We’re really having a baby.” I nod, feeling my own excitement soar as I watch the tears welling in her eyes. This is by far the most emotional and meaningful response we’ve received from the handful of people we’ve shared this news with. Probably because it means more to her than anyone else we’ve told. It might even mean more to her than anyone we will tell, including my own parents. “And Tommy’s gonna be the biological father.”

Her awed stare immediately shifts from my face to his, and I swear he’s blushing faintly as he gives a small nod to confirm what I’ve just told her. “Really?”

“Really.” He tells her, though she barely waits for his answer before grabbing him and pulling him into a tight hug. Or as tight as she’s physically capable of right now. “Don’t pop a freakin’ stitch over it!”

“It’d be worth it.” She gushes emotionally. “I can’t believe it… this is amazing.”

“Nothing’s really happened yet.”

“But it will!” Insists Dia, pulling out of their embrace and taking his face in her hands. He shoots me a sideways glance, and I bite my lip to keep myself from laughing out loud at his feigned dissatisfaction. I know he’s as happy as she is right now, no matter what his facial expression says. “I was already determined to beat this cancer, and this is even more of an incentive. I can’t wait to meet this little baby!”

“It could still take a while. I mean, just ‘cause we’re hoping to start IVF soon, that doesn’t mean it’s gonna work on the first try.” Tommy points out, doing his best to temper her enthusiasm a little. Or maybe it’s his own excitement he’s trying to keep in check. “Don’t go buying baby clothes yet.”

“I’ll buy whatever I want for my grandchild.”

“Fine, just don’t get anything with ‘Frozen’ on it. We’ve been trying to stamp that shit out for months.”

“Language!”

Telling Dia about our plans to have another baby was such a rush, it made me want to call up everyone in my phone contacts, whether they’re a family member, a friend, or some random industry
associate I haven’t spoken to in years, and tell them the good news. But I know I can’t, no matter how tempting it is. And it’s not only because we don’t want to get anyone’s hopes up, or put ourselves in the position of having to potentially share bad news with countless people. We really don’t want this to become public knowledge until it absolutely has to. Until some paparazzi photographer catches us out for a walk with all six of our kids, and we really have no choice but to reveal our good fortune to anyone who cares enough to buy a copy of People magazine or read an article on TMZ.

This is ours, not everyone else’s. We didn’t do any sit down interviews when we came out to the world, and we didn’t sell off our wedding pictures to the highest bidder, either. We’re sure as hell not offering up our unborn (or, at this point, non-existent) baby for public scrutiny!

But now that Dia knows, I feel wrong keeping it from my own parents any longer.

After we’ve left Dia’s house and gotten the kids fed and happy, Tommy volunteers to take them and Duke out for a hike at Runyon Canyon while I get my parents on Skype. They know something is going on the minute I text them; we didn’t have plans to talk or Skype today, so the fact that I’ve requested that they both get themselves to a computer as soon as possible is more than enough to clue them in. I don’t think I’ve been this anxious about Skyping with my parents since the day I confessed the truth of how my relationship with Tommy really began, and the fact that I’d cheated on Natalie for months. But this time my hands aren’t shaking with fear over how they might react. My whole body is buzzing with excitement.

“Hi, sweetheart!” Mom smiles at me through the screen, adjusting their webcam so that both she and dad are fully in the frame. “How are you?”

“Good!”

“Where are the kids?” Dad leans from one side to the other as he makes a futile attempt at seeing more of my surroundings. “It seems pretty quiet there.”

“Tommy took them out for a walk. But I can have them get on here tonight or tomorrow?”

“Would you?” Asks mom hopefully, as though she didn’t just speak to them two days ago. “We miss them so much. It feels as though they look a little different every time we Skype with them, they’re growing up so quickly.”
This is the part where I feel like a jackass for moving their grandkids to another state, even though I know plenty of other families do the same thing, and my parents don’t hold it against me. Not anymore, at least.

“I’ll make sure they’re on before dinner tonight, okay? Does six-ish your time work?”

“Perfect!” She beams gratefully. “Jess and Joe are coming over with Hans tonight, so they’ll get to see them, too.”

“Great, the kids will be really excited.”

“How is Dia doing? Have you seen her since the surgery?” Asks dad.

“We were over there today, actually. She’s doing pretty well, considering everything she’s been through lately. She’s still in pain from the surgery, but she’s trying to stay positive.”

Mom shakes her head sadly, heaving a heavy-hearted sigh. “I can’t even imagine how hard it must be for her. And for Tommy and his sister…”

“Yeah, it’s been a rough few weeks.” I admit sadly, bringing the conversation to a momentary pause as the three of us contemplate Dia’s situation, and how much we wish there was something we could do to make it easier for her.

But there isn’t.

“So…” Dad begins somewhat suspiciously. “What’s up, Tay? I assume you didn’t ask us to get on here just so you can see our pretty faces.”

“No, not really…” I chuckle softly, nervously. “The thing is, I have some news. Some big news.”

“Good news, I hope?” Mom questions with a smile that seems at least a little forced. Because she’s not sure yet if smiling is an appropriate facial expression for whatever it is I’m about to divulge.
“Great news, actually.”

How am I supposed to put this? Do I just blurt it out? Or should I do some long-winded lead up to it so that they understand right away how much thought went into this decision? I never had to do that any of the times I announced that Natalie was pregnant.

Except for the first time.

“Well?” Presses dad eagerly, quite literally shifting to the edge of his seat. “Do we get to know what this great news is now, or do we have to wait until next week’s episode?”

Here goes…

“A while back, like… last Halloween, I guess, Tommy and I got to talking about how great things have been going, and how we think we’re a pretty good team when it comes to parenting and everything.”

“That seems like a fair assessment.” Mom teases, still sounding less laid back than she’s trying to appear. “Are you joining some kind of competitive parenting league?”

“Very funny.”

“I’m sorry, I’ll be quiet now.”

“Anyway…” I take another deep breath, and I can see both of my parents do the same. “We decided that we’re ready to have another baby.”

“Oh…”

They exchange surprised glances before turning their attention back to me. Dad is apparently too stunned to speak, while mom just looks confused. Possibly even concerned.

“You’re adopting.” She asks.
Or I guess ‘assumes’ would be more accurate, because it came out as a statement of fact rather than a question. “No, we’re using a surrogate and an egg donor.”

Dad nods slowly, his face adopting the pensive expression he usually reserves for when he’s trying to find a solution to a particularly difficult problem. “So the baby will have two mothers and two fathers?”

“Neither of them is the ‘mother’. I mean, biologically, the donor will be the mother. But she’s not going to be in the baby’s life, she’s not going to help us raise it.”

“And the surrogate?” Asks mom worriedly. “What’s her role once the baby is born?”

“We’re hoping that she’ll still be in our lives, that’s the plan right now. But she’s not related to the baby genetically, and she’s not going to be helping us raise it, either. She’ll just be a friend of the family, and so will her wife and daughter.”

“So the baby isn’t going to have a mother at all? How are you going to explain that to them?” Frowns dad. “I know that Asta grew up without a mother, but at least you have pictures and video of Natalie to share with her. Her mother may not be much more than a character in a bedtime story for her right now, but at least she knows she existed, she knows what she looked like and what she was like as a person. This baby isn’t going to have that. They’re never going to know where they come from.”

“Will they be able to contact the donor when they’re older? The same way some adopted children reunite with their birth parents if they choose to?”

“No-”

“Don’t you think that might be hard on them, not being able to get to know their own mother?” Dad asks disappointedly. “I’m not saying that you and Tommy won’t be good enough parents, but there’s a natural curiosity people have about where they come from, who they come from-”

“It wasn’t our choice to have no contact with the donor, it was her decision. It’s just how it’s done.” I argue, feeling torn between sadness, anger, and unwarranted guilt over the fact that all they’ve done so far is ask questions, and not once has either of them said anything even vaguely resembling a heartfelt ‘congratulations’.
This definitely wasn’t how I was hoping things would play out. And after Dia’s reaction this morning, having my parents interrogate me about our plans to have a baby is like being sucker punched. Not to mention the fact that it brings back some unpleasant memories of my relationship with them after I first came out. I don’t see us swinging back to that level of discourse over this decision, but it hurts to have them view yet another major life choice of mine negatively.

And I haven’t even told them that I’m not going to be the biological father yet!

“I’m sorry, honey, we don’t mean to seem unsupportive-”

“Well, if you are unsupportive, how else are you supposed to seem?” I snap much more bitterly than I intended, forcing myself to stop and take a breath as I try to break down my own defenses before they grow any higher.

“We’re not unsupportive.” Dad assures me sincerely. “We just weren’t expecting this, that’s all. And it’s not something we’ve ever had to give any thought to, so of course we’re going to have a lot of questions-”

“But we shouldn’t have bombarded you with them like that. We have plenty of time to learn all about this process before the baby comes. Right now we should just be focusing on the fact that we’re going to have another grandchild.” Mom smiles a little more genuinely than before. “That’s never bad news.”

Oh yeah?

“Tommy is going to be the biological father.” I announce, watching their expressions carefully for any noticeable trace of disapproval. I can’t tell if I see any, or if it’s just residual disapproval leftover from my previous revelation.

“Oh… well… if that’s what the two of you have decided.” Mom nods thoughtfully. “I suppose it makes sense. He’s never had that experience before, and raising someone else’s children isn’t the same as having one of your own.”

“But that means this baby isn’t going to be related to your children, right?” Dad asks. “Are they okay with all of this? Have you talked to them about it, do they understand?”
“Yeah, we talked to our kids about it before we even started looking for a surrogate.” I explain as calmly as I can, reminding myself that it’s normal for them to want to know these kinds of details, and it’s not an attack. No matter how it might feel. “They weren’t keen on the idea at first, but they’re okay with it now. And they understand that they won’t be related to the baby, but that it doesn’t make the baby any less their brother or sister.”

It feels like the unspoken ‘it does’ is echoing all around me, and I have to ball my hands into fists for a moment to keep myself from arguing with something neither of them has even said. For all I know, they didn’t even think it and I’m just being paranoid.

I’m not sure what else to be right now, though.

“When is the baby due?”

“Actually, there is no due date yet. Our surrogate and donor are going through the fertility treatments they need to have before we can do the first round of IVF. We’re hoping that’ll happen in the next month or so, and then we just have to cross our fingers and hope it works on the first try.”

“And if it doesn’t? Will you keep trying?” Asks mom.

“Yeah, at least a couple more times. If it’s still not happening, we’ll have to look at working with a new donor or surrogate, or maybe both.”

“Or… maybe you could look at it as a sign?” Dad suggests, his tone conveying less judgement than his words. “You already have five beautiful, healthy children-”

Mom quickly places her hand on his arm to stop him before he can piss me off any more than he already has. “I think what your father is trying to say is, if it’s meant to be, it will be. And if not, then it wasn’t in God’s plan for you. And even though I know that will be disappointing for you and Tommy, you still have plenty to be grateful for.”

“Yeah.” I sigh, too tired from trying to keep my emotions under control to even argue with them anymore. I don’t want to argue, not about this. “I guess we’ll cross that bridge if we come to it.”
“Hopefully you won’t have to.”

“Right.” Dad agrees, forcing a small smile. “Sorry, I shouldn’t have brought all of that up. You know how I get sometimes; I start trying to solve problems before they happen.”

“Yeah, I know.”

Except that none of this even was a problem until they made it one.
I always forget how crazy busy the last couple of weeks of summer vacation can be. I never went to public school myself, so it wasn’t an issue for me when I was growing up. And Natalie was always so on top of everything with our kids, she made it look easy. The fact that she didn’t leave it until the last minute to do back-to-school shopping probably had a lot to do with it. I’m sure things wouldn’t be nearly as stressful if Tommy and I had taken care of some of this over the last couple of months. But between our trip to Tulsa, and putting finishing touches on the album, not to mention Dia being sick and our search for a surrogate, we haven’t had an abundance of free time.

That’s my story, and I’m sticking to it.

And now Jenna is moving out, and I promised her we’d help (even though she keeps telling me we don’t have to). She and Aaron finally found a two bedroom apartment close to both their jobs and within their budget, and she wanted to get the move over with before the summer break ends next week and she has to go back to work. Luckily she picked a week day to do it, so we didn’t have to deal with the kids getting underfoot. I’m sure they would have started out being helpful, but about half an hour into it they would have lost interest and split our focus. They know she’s moving out, but they don’t know it’s happening today. I don’t anticipate them kicking up a fuss when they find out, thankfully. They’ve seen her so infrequently this summer that they almost forgot she still lived in the guest house. And they know that she’s not going to disappear from their lives entirely, she’ll still come over from time to time.

She’s ready to take the next step in her life, just like we are.
It’s actually been the easiest move I’ve ever been a part of. The bed is staying, because they’re using Aaron’s instead, and the rest of the furniture is relatively small and lightweight. For the most part all that needs carrying are boxes full of personal effects and clothes, which would be much easier if the only access to the guest house from the driveway didn’t involve a narrow set of stone steps.

Me being the klutz I am, I almost fall ass over head down those steps about five times, but I manage to come out of it unscathed (although I’m sure my shoulder and arm muscles will be screaming at me tomorrow). Jenna once again insists that we don’t have to come over to the new place and help unload the uHaul, but she knows that’s not going to stop us. I don’t know how to leave a job halfway done.

Besides, I’m a naturally inquisitive person, and I wanna see their new place!

“You’re so fucking nosy.” Tommy informs me plainly as we carry a couple more boxes of books and DVDs up the stairs to Jenna and Aaron’s third floor apartment. Of course today is the day that the elevator is undergoing ‘routine maintenance’. “Maybe she said she didn’t need help because she didn’t want you snooping around her new home.”

“Or maybe it’s because she’s too sweet and thinks she’s inconveniencing us by accepting our help.” I counter, adjusting the load in my arms when it starts to slip. “How about you put less energy into insulting me and more energy into getting up the stairs? I think a sloth just passed us.”

“Shut up. My box is heavier than yours.”

“Bullshit. No way does a box full of clothes weigh as much as a box full of books.”

He rolls his eyes before finally turning his back to me again and continuing his ascent to the second floor landing. “There’re like three books in there, the rest of it is DVDs and shit. Those weigh nothing.”

“Maybe not individually.” I mumble. “We can swap right here, if you want? Then we’ll see whose box is heavier.”

“I would, but I’ve got too much momentum going now.”

“Uh-huh.”
“You guys doing okay?” Jenna calls down the stairwell to us from the floor above.

“Youp!” I reply as cheerfully as I can to ease her obvious guilt. “Almost done!”

“I’m so sorry about the elevator, I could’ve sworn they said it would be down for maintenance next Tuesday. I guess my ‘pregnancy brain’ kicked in already.”

It’s probably the tenth time she’s apologized for it in the last hour. And I’m sure it won’t be the last time she does it before we leave. “It’s fine, we don’t mind.”

“Yeah.” Agrees Tommy as we slowly approach her landing. “Taylor could use the exercise. He’s really let himself go lately.”

I know he’s insulting me on purpose right now, because he knows that I’m fucked up and I get off on it. I don’t know when he thinks I’m going to have the time (or energy) to do anything about it, though. After we’re done here, we have to go and pick the kids up from camp and pre-school, and then head home to make dinner. Shauntae, Sam, and Stella are coming over this evening, and I’m determined to serve them something more impressive than spaghetti this time! I just… haven’t figured out exactly what yet.

Which probably means I should pencil in a trip to the grocery store at some point this afternoon, too.

“So, what do you think?” Jenna asks once Tommy and I have set our boxes down with the rest of her belongings. “I know it’s pretty small, but it’s not like we’re planning to stay here forever.”

“I like it.” Tommy nods in approval, making his way further into the living room and looking around. “Way nicer than any of the dumps I lived in before I moved in with Taylor.”

“The apartments you lived in before weren’t dumps.”

“Maybe not, but they were pretty fucking generic. At least this building has some history, you know? Some character.”
“That was one of my must-haves.” Aaron chimes in as he joins us from one of the bedrooms down the hall. “I didn’t wanna live in one of those apartments that has the same floor plan and the same features as every other apartment building built in the last twenty years. I wanted something that would feel more… homey.”

“That’s exactly how I felt when we were house hunting! I didn’t want some big, beige box that looked just like every other house on the block. I wanted something that would feel like it was ours, like no one else had that same house.”

Jenna smiles as Aaron curls his arm around her waist and pulls her closer, kissing the top of her head affectionately. “One of the reasons I felt so at home in this place when we came to look around was because the architectural style was similar to your house.”

“I can see that… the hardwood floors, the arches, the fireplace...”

“I think that’s my favorite thing.” Aaron chuckles softly. “It feels like every other apartment has one of those ‘modern’ corner fireplaces, and they’re just kinda… there. This is a real fireplace, not just a hole in the wall. Not that there’s generally much need for a fireplace in Los Angeles, but I can actually see myself using this one.”

“For s’mores!” Grins Jenna eagerly. “Ooh! That’s what I want for dinner.”

“Pregnancy craving?” Asks Tommy.

“Nope. Just a regular ol’ craving.”

“If it was a pregnancy craving, wouldn’t pickles be involved somehow?” Aaron muses semi-seriously. “A guy at work told me his wife drank the pickle juice right out of the jar when she was pregnant.”

Jenna automatically recoils from his touch, as though he’s about to force her to drink pickle juice right here and now. “Ew! No way am I doing anything that gross.”

“You might not get a choice.” I warn her playfully. “The pregnant body wants what it wants.”
She turns to Aaron, pointing a demanding finger at him. “You have to promise that if you see me trying to drink pickle juice out of the jar, or put pickles in anything that definitely doesn’t go with pickles, you’ll stop me!”

“I’ll try.” He laughs quietly, pulling her into a hug. “But I’m not gonna mess with a hormonal pregnant chick. I wanna be physically capable of having more kids in the future.”

“Well, on that note...”

“We’ll let you guys get settled in.” Tommy finishes for me as Jenna lets go of Aaron and hurries over to hug us. “Congrats on the new place and everything.”

“Thank you.” She tells him sincerely. “And not just for all of the lifting and carrying today, but... for everything.”

“Anytime.”

I don’t think she actually lets go of Tommy entirely before she grabs me and pulls me into a tight hug. “Thank you doesn’t even begin to cover it.”

“Ditto.” I smile, giving her a gentle squeeze for emphasis. “And I’m so happy for you. You deserve to have the most amazing life.”

“Don’t say it like that.” She protests emotionally as she finally lets me go.

“Like what?”

“Like I’m never going to see you again!”

“Of course you’re gonna see us again.” I assure her. “I still have to buy you that stroller, remember?”

“I still say you don’t have to-”
“And I still say I do.”

After another round of hugs, and promises that we’ll definitely see her again sooner rather than later, Tommy and I say our goodbyes and head down to the minivan. I can’t tell if he’s being so quiet because he has nothing to say, or if something is bothering him. I’m probably over-reacting. But then, he didn’t exactly handle the news of Jenna’s pregnancy all that well, and there was plenty of pregnancy related conversation going on up there.

For all I know, he’s jealous that neither of us will ever have pregnancy cravings.

“You okay?” I ask, trying my hardest to sound casual and unconcerned.

He shrugs as I fish the car keys out of the pocket of my jeans and use the button to unlock the doors. “I could use a neck rub, if you’re offering?”

“I wasn’t, but I can be.”

“Maybe tonight?”

“Whenever.”

“So what’s next?” He sighs wearily, pulling the passenger side door shut behind him and leaning against the headrest. “Do we need to pick anything up for tonight?”

“That kinda depends.”

“On what?”

“On what we’re having for dinner.” I reply sheepishly. “What do you feel like?”

He smirks and shakes his head at me as I start the car. “You already know what my answer to that
“We can’t have sex for dinner! There will be women and children present.” I tease.

“I was gonna say lasagna, loser.”

“I guess I could make that… but I made Italian last time.”

“Oh no!” He gasps mockingly. “You’re telling me you made them a pasta dish three weeks ago?! They’re gonna think you’re so unoriginal!”

“Shut up.” I mumble, pretending to be offended. “Maybe you should make dinner for once.”

“Fine. Just get me a list of what everyone wants from Taco Bell.”

It hardly matters what they want, what they’ll get is stomach cramps. “Lasagna it is.”

This is probably going to sound stupid, but I love grocery shopping with Tommy. We don’t get to do it very often, because it’s generally not the best use of our time for both of us to handle a chore or errand that can be accomplished by one person. But it’s one of those couple things that I always wanted to do with him before we officially became a couple. It’s simple, and for most people it’s nothing special. They’ve never been grocery shopping with Tommy, though. He’s worse than our kids when it comes to picking up random stuff as we weave our way up and down the aisle of the store. I generally don’t put up much of a fight when he dumps unnecessary crap into the cart, like the latest disgusting flavor of potato chips that Lay’s has blessed the world with. I know that even if he decides he hates them when he gets them home, at least one of our kids will probably devour them.

Besides, it makes him happy when he thinks he’s found some crazy new product to try. And when he’s happy, I’m happy.

Someone who is decidedly not happy is Penny. From the moment we pick the kids up at camp she keeps her eyes trained on her feet, and her mouth shut. The only time she speaks is to curtly inform us that she’s ‘fine’ whenever we ask what’s wrong. Her aggravated tone makes it pretty clear that she’s anything but fine, though. Unfortunately, the more we pry into what’s bothering her, the worse her mood is likely to get.
Normally, that might not stop me from harassing her anyway, because regardless of whether or not I know better, I can’t seem to help myself. But today is her lucky day, because I have a meal for ten to prepare, and Tommy has to keep her younger siblings distracted while I do it. By the time we’ve made it home, and I’ve unpacked the groceries and gotten all of the ingredients together, I’m left with just enough time to actually prepare and cook the lasagna (and run around the kitchen in a panic, just because) before our guests show up.

I really wasn’t nervous about this dinner until now. I have no reason to be, everything has been going great with Shauntae so far. We haven’t seen her or her family in person since our first dinner, when she agreed to be our surrogate. But we have Skyped with her a couple of times, and we text back and forth like old friends. I guess that, until she’s actually carrying our baby, I’m going to continue to have these mini, internal freak outs over the possibility of things falling through. Which is stupid, because even once she’s pregnant, there are no absolute guarantees. And it would be a waste of time and energy for me to be freaking out for the next ten months (or more).

Sadly, I excel at wasting time and energy on freaking out over things that will probably never happen.

The greeting they receive this time is a lot less formal than their first visit. River and Viggo don’t bother to tear themselves away from the Wii to meet them at the door, and Asta only stays in the foyer long enough to tell Stella that she has something to show her. Then she darts off into the family room and leaves Ezra to coax Stella into following.

Penny refused to come out of her room when the doorbell rang.

“I hope you don’t mind, but we brought dessert.” Shauntae tells me somewhat bashfully as she hands me a pie dish.

“Mind?” I chuckle softly, swatting Tommy away when he leans in closer to see what it is. “I know we don’t know each other all that well yet, but one thing you’ll learn pretty fast is that dessert is always welcome in this house.”

“What is it?” Tommy asks curiously. “Are those pine nuts?”

“It’s called a Torta Della Nonna.” Explains Shauntae. “Taylor told me last time that he’d had it at the restaurant I work at, and that he liked it, so...”
“If I used the word ‘like’, I understated my feelings.”

“It looks good!” He smiles.

“It tastes amazing.” Sam and I reply in unison, leaving us both laughing quietly at the coincidence.

“I think we should have dessert before dinner.” I propose as Tommy and I lead Shauntae and Sam through to the dining room.

“I think I saw one of those motivational signs with something like that written on it once.” Nods Sam in agreement. “It sounds like a good idea to me.”

“It’s one of my mottos.”

“Any saying that encourages stuffing your face is your motto.” Jokes Tommy, taking the pie out of my hands and heading for the kitchen. “And anything pro-coffee.”

“Ooh, we should have coffee with our Torta Della Nonna!” I exclaim enthusiastically as I follow him. “That would be very Italian.”

“I wanna mock you… but I’m kinda too turned on by how Italian you sounded when you said Torta Della Nonna.”

Interesting. “Frittata.”

“Stop! We have company!”

“No judgement here.” Shauntae giggles. “Sam reacts the same way whenever I start throwing around Italian.”

“I didn’t even know I had a thing for Italian accents until I met her!”
“And I’m not even *slightly* Italian.” She admits with a helpless shrug. “I just happen to have a flare for Italian food.”

Tommy points at me almost accusingly. “Same! And I *swear* he uses it against me.”

“Right?” Commiserates Sam with a sad shake of her head. “I’d complain, but…”

“Kinda love it?”

“Yup.”

When we started this process, I hoped we’d find a nice couple who were completely accepting of our relationship, and who we had a few interests in common with. I wanted to feel comfortable around them, and for us to all get along well enough to remain in each others lives in some way even after the baby was born. We’d invite each other to our kid’s birthday parties, we’d exchange Christmas cards and keep them in the loop about any big events in the life of the child they helped us to have.

I never imagined that we’d end up working with another same sex couple, and that they would be the female version of us!

What makes it feel even more right is how quickly our kids have taken to them. To be fair, our kids take to most people pretty quickly, they’ve always been incredibly sociable and open to new experiences. But it means more this time. If, for some strange reason, they hadn’t warmed up to Shauntae, Sam, and Stella so quickly, it definitely would have made us think twice about asking Shauntae to be our surrogate.

“Dad, can I have more lasaga?” Asks River, careful to cover his mouth as he speaks because he hasn’t finished chewing his last bite of food. And apparently it’s less rude if no one can see it.

“You can, but then you won’t have room for dessert.”

“There’s dessert?!” Viggo gasps, not bothering to follow his older brother’s example and cover his mouth, and therefore earning himself a disapproving scowl from Tommy (which he chooses to ignore). “What is it?”
“It’s a special surprise. Shauntae made it for us.” Tommy tells him. “But it’s only for people who don’t talk with their mouths full.”

“I won’t!”

“You’re doing it right now, dude.”

Viggo quickly finishes his mouthful before opening his mouth as wide as he can to demonstrate that it’s gone. “I’m done now!”

“May I be excused?” Mumbles Penny, refusing to look up from her plate, which holds an untouched serving of lasagna and a few pieces of wilted lettuce.

“You barely ate.”

She shrugs. “I had salad.”

“You didn’t have any of your lasagna.”

“I wasn’t very hungry.”

“Well… just have a few bites-“

“I’m not hungry.” She snaps impatiently, which surprises Stella so much that she shrinks lower in her chair. “I just wanna go to my room.”

“But-“

“Taylor…” Tommy sighs quietly, shaking his head at me to discourage me from making this worse.

He knows me too well. “Okay… you can go to your room.”
Without another word, Penny pushes her chair away from the table, gets up, and hurries out of the dining room. Her younger siblings stare after her in confusion, while Shauntae and Sam look at us with nothing but sympathy. If Penny were a few years older, I wouldn’t be so concerned about her. I’d chalk it up to teenage hormones or something and try to let it go. But this is so unlike her, and she’s far too young to be having teenage girl-style mood swings…

Isn’t she?

“Uh… you know what, guys, why don’t you go watch TV for a while so we can clean up and get dessert ready?” I suggest to River and Viggo. They don’t need to be told twice, they’re practically out of the room before I’ve finished speaking. “Asta, did you show Stella your new books yet?”

Asta’s eyes immediately grow wide with delight, and she turns to her new friend eagerly. “I have ‘Llama Llama Red Pajama’! Wanna see?”

After turning to Sam and Shauntae to see if they’re okay with it, and receiving two nods of approval, Stella quickly scrambles out of her seat and follows Asta out of the room. I notice that Ezra hasn’t made a move to excuse himself. In fact, he’s been as quiet as Penny all evening, just… less cranky. He seems almost guilty, but I can’t imagine that her bad mood is his fault. I know brothers and sisters piss each other off sometimes, but the two of them have always gotten along pretty well, for the most part.

“Ez?”

“Yeah?” He asks as he looks up from his dinner plate to meet my eyes.

Now I know he knows something. “Do you know why Penny’s been so upset all evening? Did something happen at camp today?”

“I…” He glances sideways at Shauntae and Sam. “I told her I wouldn’t say anything.”

“We can leave the room if you guys need to talk.” Sam offers as she and Shauntae start to get out of their seats.
“It’s not that.” Ezra assures them apologetically. “I just… don’t wanna make it worse.”

“Make what worse?” Frowns Tommy. “What’s going on?”

He takes a deep breath, looking back and forth between our expectant faces. “You have to promise you’re not gonna get mad or like… go to camp tomorrow and make a big deal about it to the counsellors.”

“Why? Did one of the counsellors do something to upset her?” Tommy asks with growing concern.

“No, it wasn’t them.”

“Then who was it?” I press urgently. “What happened?”

“There’s this guy, Lucas…” I knew it. I bet it’s that little punk who wouldn’t stop poking her in the back! “He likes Penny-”

“We know, she told us.” Mutters Tommy. “What did he do?”

“Nothing. It’s not him, not really. It’s just… there’s this girl, Tiffany, who likes Lucas. She’s my age, and so is he. She found out that he likes Penny, and now her and her friends are like… picking on Penny, even though Penny doesn’t like Lucas like that.”


“What do you mean ‘picking on her’?” I ask worriedly. “What are they saying?”

“Stupid stuff.” He rolls his eyes, presumably at how ridiculous these little brats are being. “Like no boys are ever gonna like her ‘cause she’s ugly, and she’s fat-”

“Seriously ?!” Exclaims Sam in disbelief. “Are they blind?”
“I know!” He agrees wholeheartedly. “That’s what I said, but they don’t care what I think. And then Penny got upset, so Lucas told Tiffany off, which just made her even madder at Penny, even though Penny didn’t say anything to her or Lucas.”

“I do not understand teenage girls.” I groan, dropping my head into my hands.

“They’re not even teenagers, they’re fucking twelve!”

“They’re starting early these days.” Sam commiserates with us. “Trust me, twelve is like retirement age for bullies now. Stella wanted to go on a diet last month because a girl in her pre-school class told her she’s too fat to take ballet lessons. It’s insane.”

“You think that’s why Penny wasn’t eating?” Tommy asks, anxiously eyeing her untouched entree. “Because this Tiffany girl called her fat?”

“Maybe.” Shrugs Shauntae uncertainly. “Or maybe it was just because she was upset.”

“Well no way am I gonna send her off to camp tomorrow like nothing happened and let her suffer through another round of this.”

“Dad, you promised you weren’t gonna say anything!”

“I never promised. You told me to promise, but I never actually promised.” I reply childishly, already kicking myself for behaving so irrationally.

“It’ll just make things worse if you get the counselors involved.” He continues to insist earnestly as he gets out of his chair. “Tiffany’s not gonna stop picking on Penny just ‘cause you rat her out. It’ll just make her hate Penny more, and she’ll still be mean to her, she’ll just do it so the counsellors won’t see.”

“How?”

“I don’t know, but she will!”
“Ez, I have to say something.”

“Fine.” He sighs, turning to storm out of the room. “Just don’t expect me to ever tell you anything again.”

Great. Now one of my kids is sitting up in their room with an empty stomach and hurt feelings, and the other doesn’t think he can trust me anymore! Somehow, in my efforts to make things better, I became the bad guy.

So what am I supposed to do here? Just keep my mouth shut and pretend that my daughter isn’t being bullied by some jealous, mean-spirited little girl? Over a boy! I stupidly thought I had at least a few more years of smooth sailing before Penny started coming home in tears over stuff like this. I’m not even slightly prepared for it to start now.

But I know I need to figure out how to get prepared, and fast.
I’m not someone who knows how to do nothing. It’s not how I’m made. For better or worse, I tend to choose action over inaction at every opportunity. I’m not saying it’s always the right choice, but I’d rather try and fail than be left to wonder what the outcome would have been.

The only exception is with my kids. They’re the one thing in my life I’ve never been able to be impulsive about. I’ve never second guessed my choices about anything the way I do when it involves them. I’m constantly questioning whether I made the right decision, whether I’m handling situations in the best way possible for them. And that’s where I’m at right now, debating whether or not it’s in Penny’s best interests for me to complain to her camp counselors in the morning or keep my mouth shut. I’m not even sure if I should let Penny know that Ezra told me anything.

Why doesn’t parenting come with a manual? They should make you take a course, and you should need to get re-certified every year. There could even be seminars where experts fill you in on all the newest tips and tricks!

I can’t be the only parent who feels this way. In fact, I know I’m not.

“It sucks that there’s never only one right or wrong way to handle a situation, especially when it comes to your kids.” Shauntae empathizes as we listen to the joyful laughter and shouting coming from our children playing in the next room. “What works the first time might not work the second, and what works for one kid might not work for another. It’s like you’re just…”
“Guessing.” Agrees Tommy glumly. “Which is so fucking messed up. I mean, of all the things in life to have no clue about, how to raise happy and healthy kids shouldn’t be one of them.”

Sam shakes her head as she heaves a weary sigh. “Sometimes I feel like I have all these options to choose from when it comes to raising Stella, and I have no idea which is the right one. And there’s no way to know.”

“You may as well just flip a coin.”

“My parents always made it look so easy.” I lament enviously, taking a sip of my beer. “I think the only time I’ve ever seen them struggle with how to handle something was when I told them I’d gotten my eighteen year old girlfriend pregnant. And when I told them my wife had died in childbirth. And when I told them I was moving out here. And when I told them I was gay. Oh, and that time I got hit by a car… notice a theme here?”

“Is the theme that you’ve been a pain in the ass your whole life?” Tommy smirks faintly, but his tone doesn’t hold nearly as much mocking as it would under less troubling circumstances.

“He’s got a point, though. I swear my mom and dad never second guessed a single decision they ever made when it came to how they raised me. And if they did, you never would’ve known it.” Adds Shauntae pensively. “When I came out in highschool, they didn’t bat an eyelash. My mom wanted to throw me a ‘coming out’ party!”

“When I came out, the only thing my mom wanted the throw was me. Out of the house.” Sam jokes cheerlessly, and Shauntae quickly takes her hand and laces their fingers. “I guess that just goes to show that not all parents get it right.”

“It just goes to show that not all parents try to.” Tommy tells her sympathetically. “I’ve never been able to figure out how people treat their kids like that.”

“Me either. And I spent a lot of time trying to figure it out, believe me.” She shrugs, turning her face towards Shauntae’s and smiling fondly. “Eventually I gave up trying to understand, and made my own family instead.”

“Definite upgrade.” He smirks as she raises her glass in agreement.
“So… you don’t talk to your parents?” I asked hesitantly. “Ever?”

“Not really. We used to talk on Christmas and birthdays and stuff, but they never wanted to hear about Shauntae. When Stella was born they refused to acknowledge that she was my daughter, and that was pretty much the last straw for me. I told them we’re a package deal, you know? They can’t have a relationship with me until they’re ready to have one with my wife and kid, too.”

I can’t even imagine what it must be like to have to give up on your parents like that. Or rather, to have them give up on you. Even when I first came out to my family, and they were holding interventions and acting like I was a totally different person, they never stopped trying. It hurt, and it was incredibly hard, but I never considered cutting them out of my life completely. I don’t know what I would have done if they’d never been able to accept Tommy. And I’ll admit, I’m more than a little worried about whether or not they’ll bond with our baby the way they’ve bonded with each and every one of their other grandchildren.

But there’s no way to know, not until the baby is born.

Hopefully, between now and then, they’ll come to terms with the whole ‘test tube baby’ thing. I’m trying to be patient with them, because I know this isn’t something they’ve ever had to think about before. As far as I know, no one in our family has ever used IVF, let alone an egg donor or a surrogate; we’re a pretty fertile bunch. But I’m not sure any of them would have considered it even if they’d had problems conceiving. They would’ve probably viewed it as god’s will, maybe even as his way of telling them to foster or adopt. The thought of having doctors fertilizing eggs in a petri dish and then choosing which embryos are worth using would turn their stomachs.

I think that’s pretty hypocritical, though. It’s like saying that Dia has cancer, so we should just let her die because clearly that’s what god has in mind for her. But we have doctors who can save her life, and no one believes that’s wrong or that science it going ‘too far’ by pumping her body full of chemo drugs to kill the cancer cells.

I guess some people like to pick and choose which medical interventions they deem acceptable, just as they like to pick and choose which bits of the bible to take seriously.

It’s a little after nine when Sam and Shauntae take Stella home, and we make plans to get together again soon (though they insist that next time we don’t play host). Asta should be asleep already, so she’s the first one ushered through the bedtime routine, with River and Viggo not far behind. I don’t even bother reminding Ezra that he needs be in bed with his light out by ten-thirty, he knows the drill. Which just leaves Penny, who hasn’t ventured out of her room since dinner.
“You gonna talk to her?” Tommy asks as he quietly closes Viggo and River’s bedroom door behind him and joins me in the hallway.

“Maybe. When I figure out what the hell I should say.”

He nods understandingly, taking a few steps to close the distance and settling his hands lightly at my waist. “I know you don’t wanna go in there until you’ve figured out the perfect thing to say to her, but… there’s no such thing.”

“Are you sure?” I pout pathetically.

“Pretty sure.” He offers me a small smile. “Sorry.”

“So you’re saying I should just… go in there and start talking?”

“Yup.”

“What if I make it worse?”

After giving it a moment of thought, he leans in and kisses me softly. “At least you tried.”

“Maybe you should do it. You always say the right thing to them.”

“Like hell I do! I get it wrong at least as often as I get it right.”

“Rock, paper, scissors?” I propose hopefully, but rather than answering me verbally, he simply rolls his eyes and gives me a gentle shove towards Penny’s bedroom door.

There’s no point in my standing out here and over-thinking this any longer than I already have. If the perfect thing to say hasn’t come to me yet, I doubt it’s miraculously going to put in an appearance any time soon.
I tap my knuckles lightly against the door before turning the handle and gingerly opening it. I’m half expecting her to tell me to go away before I’ve even poked my head into the room, but to my surprise she doesn’t say a word.

“Hey…”

“I know it’s bedtime.” She assures me grudgingly, closing her book with a tired sigh. “I was just going to brush my teeth.”

“Oh… okay. But can I talk to you first?”

My request leaves her frozen on the edge of her bed, and when she chances a look at me, I can see something in her eyes that looks a hell of a lot like guilt. “Why?”

“Because I’m worried about you. You seemed really unhappy after camp today, and you didn’t eat much at dinner-”

“I’m fine, I just wasn’t hungry.”

“I talked to Ezra…” I admit cautiously, watching as her shoulders slump in defeat. “He told me what happened at camp.”

“It’s not a big deal, he wasn’t supposed to say anything.” She mumbles.

“I’m glad he did, because I needed to know.”

“Why? So you can tell the camp counselors tomorrow and totally embarrass me?”

I wonder why girls seem so much more concerned with being embarrassed than boys. It’s not like my sons never tell me I’m doing something embarrassing, but they also tend to laugh at me rather than hiding their faces in shame. Penny acts like it’s going to ruin her entire life and rob her of every potential future opportunity she might have if I don’t stop doing whatever it is I’m doing that she finds so humiliating!
“I promise I’m not going to say anything to anyone if you don’t want me to.”

She eyes me suspiciously, clearly wondering what the catch is. “How come?”

“Because I can see how upset you are.” I tell her understandingly as I slowly make my way over to the bed and take a seat beside her. “And I don’t want to make it worse for you. I would never intentionally do anything to make you feel bad. You know that, right?”

“I know.” She nods, gazing down at her hands. “I wish other people wouldn’t, either. I don’t know why they can’t just leave me alone; I didn’t do anything to them.”

For a moment I’m at a loss. How do you explain to a ten-year-old why people feel the need to drag each other down? And not just kids; it doesn’t stop when you graduate high school or even college. Not that I have any experience with either of those things, but I would assume a college degree doesn’t exempt you from being treated like shit by your peers. It’s pathetic and pointless. But apparently it’s something you can never completely escape from, no matter who you are or how successful you may be.

That is something I have some experience with.

“You know how sometimes your aunts and uncles tease me about how I looked like a girl when I was Ezra’s age?”

She rolls her eyes at what she probably thinks is my hopeless attempt to relate to her problems. “Yeah, but they’re just doing it for fun, they’re not trying to be mean and upset you.”

“No, they’re not. But a lot of people teased me about that kind of thing when I was younger, and they were being mean.”

“Who teased you?”

“Sometimes it was people I thought were my friends, and sometimes it was people I didn’t even know. And they teased me about other stuff, too. Stuff that wasn’t true, and stuff that was true but that I had no reason to feel bad about. But I did feel bad. I started to believe things that I knew
weren’t true.”

Her brow furrows in confusion. “Why?”

“I don’t know.” I shrug, unable to explain why it is that I, and probably countless other people, believe the lies other people tell them about themselves. “I guess I always found it easier to believe all the bad things people said about me. For some stupid reason, the world makes it really hard for us to feel good about ourselves, and really easy for us to think the worst. But your grandfather said something to me back then that I’ve never forgotten.”

“What?”

“That the people who say these things about us only do it to distract other people and themselves from the things they don’t like about who they are. It’s not us. The only thing we do to bring it out in them is to be, or have, or do something that they wish was theirs instead.”

“They pick on people they wish they could be more like?”

“A lot of the time, yeah. And I can see why this girl would pick on you.”

She exhales a resentful huff. “Yeah, ’cause Lucas likes me and she wants him to like her.”

“I don’t think that’s all it is. I think it’s because you’re the kind of person people like. You’re sweet, and smart, and funny. You’re beautiful, inside and out, and you’re kind to everyone. People are drawn to that, they wanna be around someone who shines that brightly.” I can see her cheeks getting pinker by the second, and I can’t help but smile at how bashful she suddenly is. It’s nice to make her blush from something other than mortification for once. ”Your mom was the same way.”

“She was?” Her eyes light up at the prospect, and I nod as I affectionately stroke a few strands of silky blonde hair from her face.

“She had so many friends when she was in school. She was a good student, and she was really talented… she could have been anything she wanted to be. And there were still people who were mean to her.”
“Why?”

“Because of all the good things I just said about her, because they wished they were more like her. Some people hated her because she was with me, and they wanted me to be with them instead, even though they didn’t really know me. They didn’t know her, either, but they would still make up lies about her, and call her ugly—”

“She wasn’t ugly!” Penny exclaims in absolute outrage. “She was never ugly, she was beautiful!”

“She was, very. And so are you.” I swear wholeheartedly. “And this girl at camp, Tiffany or whatever her name is, she’s nothing like you. She just wishes she was. But she doesn’t know how to be, so instead of being kind to people and making them want to be her friend like you do, she’s mean to people and bullies them into doing what she wants. I bet her ‘friends’ don’t even like her all that much, they just pretend to so she won’t pick on them.”

“That’s what Tommy said about that girl in my class who was mean to me when we moved here from Tulsa.”

I should’ve known. I told him he always knows the right thing to say!

“And it was just as true then as it is now. I know it’s hard to believe me when I tell you that people don’t treat you badly because they dislike who you are, but because they’re jealous of who you are. I didn’t believe my dad when he said the same things to me, I thought he was just making stuff up to make me feel better. But the older I got, and the more I thought about it every time someone said something horrible about me, the more sense it made.” She nibbles on her bottom lip as she silently considers everything that I’ve said, struggling to accept that it might all be true. There’s only one thing I can think of to say that might sway her. “When people are mean to you, just try to remember that people were mean to your mom, too. And none of the things they said about her were true, so there’s a good chance that none of the things they’re saying about you are true, either.”

Seeing the smile spread across her face as she takes my words to heart is sheer relief. It’s not like I ever want to screw up important conversations with my kids, but this was definitely one I wanted to get right.

“I love you, daddy.” She tells me, wrapping her arms around me and snuggling against my chest the way she used to when she was little.
“I love you, too, baby girl.”

I would love nothing more than to stay here and hold my daughter until she’s ready to let me go. It’s rare that we have moments like this anymore; the older she gets, the less she tends to want to snuggle with her dear old dad. I get it, she’s not a kid anymore. That doesn’t mean I don’t miss it, though. Sadly, I don’t trust myself not to stick my foot in my mouth. The odds of me saying something that undoes all of the good I somehow managed to do increase with every second I spend in this room.

It’s not like I try to ruin moments like these, I’m just... naturally gifted.

After making sure that she’s truly feeling better about everything, and that she knows she can always talk to me about it whenever she needs to, I kiss her goodnight and make my way to my own bedroom. Tommy is lounging on our bed in his underwear, scrolling through something on his phone. I can’t help but smile to myself as I tug my shirt over my head and throw it aside before crawling onto the mattress beside him.

“What’re you looking at?” I ask curiously, resting against the pillows and propping my chin on his shoulder so that I can see the screen for myself. “Is that Stella?”

“Yeah.” He replies distractedly, randomly tapping the tip of his finger on pictures as he browses someone’s Instagram account. “Sam followed me on Instagram.”

“So you thought you’d look at every picture she ever posted?”

“Not every picture. I don’t really give a shit about the food pictures and stuff, I just wanted to… you know…”

“Cyber stalk her a little?”

“It’s not stalking!” He exclaims indignantly. “And she just liked a picture I posted two freaking years ago, so if what I’m doing right now is stalking, she stalked me first.”

“I bet she didn’t do it in her underwear, though.” I tease him, nipping playfully at the soft skin of his earlobe my teeth. “Creeper.”
“Whatever. I’ve seen the stuff you look at when you’re in your underwear. I’m nowhere near as creepy as you.”

“You keep telling yourself that.”

He turns his phone off before placing it on the nightstand and rolling onto his side to face me. “How’d it go with Penny?”

“Good, I think. She didn’t say ‘I hate you’, or ‘leave me alone’, or ‘I don’t want to talk about it’… that counts as a win, right?”

“I knew you wouldn’t fuck it up.” He smiles proudly, shifting a little closer so that he can leave a kiss on my arm. “What did you say to her?”

“Just that some people suck, basically. And they know it, so they pick on people like her, who have a lot going for them, because they think it makes them better somehow.”

“Sucks that kids have to find that kinda stuff out so young, though. It seems like it shouldn’t be something they have to deal with yet. I mean… where the hell do kids learn this shit from anyway?”

“I don’t know.” I sigh glumly as I turn onto my side so that we’re face to face. “I hate that they can’t just be kids, you know? They’ve been through enough already. Why can’t people just… not be assholes?”

“I’m starting to think it’s just kinda… there. Like, it’s survival instinct or something, and everyone has it. But only some people have lives so fucking small and empty that they have to resort to that kind of thing. In some twisted way, it’s like it’s a good thing if our kids are the ones getting bullied instead of doing the bullying. It means they’re happy, and they don’t feel like they have to sink that low just to feel like they have control over something.”

I know he’s right. But I still wish it didn’t have to be that way. I wish our kids didn’t have to suffer just because other kids aren’t as happy as they are. I wish people could find ways of filling the voids in their lives, ways of feeling empowered and in control, without trying to make our kids feel worthless. It’s natural for me to want to protect them, it’s in my blood, and I don’t know how to handle the fact that I can’t. And the older they get, the more painful these things will continue to be. Twelve-year-olds have nothing on teenagers when it comes to bullying. And it doesn’t even stop once they turn eighteen! Adults play pointless mind games, too. Trying to make each other jealous,
trying to one up each other, trying to tear each other down, trying to be better than the next person. Or they judge each other, and reject each other, imposing their ideals on each other, fearing anything other than their idea of normal, persecuting what they can’t understand...

It’s never ending.

And there’s nothing we can do to shield our kids from any of it. The only thing we can do is try to raise them to be the kind of people who treat others with respect, who think for themselves instead of following the crowd, who ask questions and keep an open mind, and who refuse to stand by and do nothing when they witness injustice.

But that’s all we can do. At some point, we have to let go and hope that we raised them right.

And that’s pretty fucking terrifying.

“What’re you thinking about?” Asks Tommy, his fingertips trailing lazily up and down the inside of my forearm.

“Just… how scary parenting is. Even when you feel like you might actually be doing an okay job, there’s still a whole world out there just waiting to screw your kids up for you if you don’t do it yourself.”

He exhales a soft breath of laughter. “Totally.”

“And we want to go through it all over again? I mean…” I shake my head in disbelief. “What the hell is wrong with us?”

“Beats me.” His shoulder rises and falls in a helpless shrug. “I blame you.”

“Me?!”

“Yeah, you. I didn’t have any kids before I met you. You did this to me, asshole.”
“You had a choice, you didn’t have to join the insanity.”

I watch as the smirk on his lips fades a little, his expression becoming more serious for a moment. “Wasn’t much of a choice, though, was it? And I wouldn’t go back and change it, even if I could.”

“Good, ‘cause you can’t.” I inform him plainly, pushing on his chest until he gives in and rolls onto his back, allowing me to easily climb on top of him. “No take-backs, remember?”

The smile reappears on his face, quickly becoming a full blown grin. “I remember.”

“There’s no way out now, you’re stuck with me forever. I’m never letting you go.”

“Promise?” He asks flirtatiously, wriggling his hips beneath mine.

Rather than simply telling him that I promise, or crossing my heart, I lean down and capture his lips with my own, sealing that unspoken vow with a kiss. He responds instantly and eagerly, threading his fingers into my hair and holding me close, almost as though he’s afraid I might stop kissing him if he doesn’t.

But I have absolutely no intention of stopping, or of doing anything else that might result in me being any further away from him than I am right at this moment. Because even when we drain each other of every last shred of physical energy that we have left at the end of days like today, we recharge each other emotionally. While he’s leaving me weak, he’s also making me stronger.

Hell, he does that just by being in my life, regardless of whether he’s lying in the same bed or if he’s even in the same building.

That’s why, despite the joke I made about us being crazy for wanting to go through the trials and tribulations of parenting all over again when we don’t have to, there’s not a doubt in my mind that we can handle it. We can handle anything, because we’re us.

It’s what we do.
Chapter 40

Chapter Notes

It feels strange to post this chapter, and it'll probably feel strange to post anything about Tommy's mom being sick from this point on. I wrote this chapter probably about 2 months ago, with no idea that Tommy's mom was sick in real life. :( The LAST thing I want is to be disrespectful. I considered waiting another week to update, but I doubt it's going to feel less weird seven days from now. The only other option I have is to go back and take out every mention of her being sick, and scrap the story line entirely.

Anyway, I hope this doesn't offend anyone, but I'll understand if people would rather not continue reading the story if I continue with that particular story line.

We’ve never cancelled a tour before.

We’ve cancelled shows, but even that is rare for us. In fact, for the first half of our career we only ever cancelled shows because of natural disasters. And then we had to cancel a show when Ike had a potentially life threatening blood clot, which I think is a totally legitimate reason to cancel a concert! And we’ve cancelled a couple of shows because I was physically incapable of singing, which usually meant that I’d been sick for a while already and had pushed myself past the limit (I’m good at that). My body would be like, “Fine, you’re not gonna take care of yourself? Screw you then. Have fun not being able to speak for three days!”

Good times.
The point is, I’ve never considered cancelling a show, let alone a whole tour, when all three of us were healthy, and people wouldn’t run the risk of being swept away by a hurricane just by coming to see us perform. Until now…

When we planned this tour, Tommy and I weren’t trying to have a baby, and his mom wasn’t sick, and he would have had Jenna here to help out. Now none of those things are true anymore, and I feel like the worst husband in the world for up and leaving him here to deal with it all alone. He hasn’t asked me not to go, he hasn’t even hinted at the idea, and I know he’s not going to. I just hate the thought of him having to cope by himself for six weeks. Eight weeks, if you include the two weeks I have to spend in Tulsa rehearsing before we even hit the road. And it doesn’t matter that I’ll be home two days out of every seven once we’re on tour, it doesn’t feel like enough.

Especially not after the chaos of the past couple of weeks.

We’d gotten used to not having Jenna around in the evenings this summer; we got complacent. We thought the transition back to the kids school schedule would be no big deal, since they’d been on a similar one with summer camp. But we forgot to factor in all of the extra stresses that come with school. And Jenna was such a big help with those things, I don’t think we even realized just how much she handled in those brief after school hours when we were lucky enough to have her here. I called her up at the end of the first week and retroactively thanked her for everything she’d done for us, because I felt like I hadn’t ever appreciated it as much as I should have. She, of course, told me I was being silly and that Tommy and I had always made sure she felt appreciated.

We haven’t decided yet if we’re going to try hiring someone else to come over and help the kids with homework on weekdays. We haven’t really had time to discuss it. When I’m not busy with work, Tommy is accompanying his mom back and forth from the hospital for her chemo. And the rest of the time, we’re taking care of the house, and the kids, and everything else that life throws at us. But I think we need to make time to discuss it, because I’m leaving for Tulsa in a few weeks, and I can’t stand the idea of Tommy having to juggle all of this alone when some days the two of us can barely handle it together.

I just don’t want him to think that I’m questioning his ability to do it himself. I know he can, but he shouldn’t have to, not if we can find a way to avoid it. Originally, we were relying on Dia and Lisa to help out as much as their work schedules allowed. But that was before Dia was spending half of her time in the hospital and Lisa was spending all of her down time helping Dia.

I’m worried that Tommy is going to be overwhelmed, and that he’s going to feel like he’s choosing between his sick mom and his kids because there’s not enough of him to go around without wearing himself so thin that he snaps. Taking Dia to her appointments is the only thing he can do to feel useful to her right now. It gives him some small sense of control over the situation, even though he
really has none at all. I don’t want him to lose that.

“Hey.”

Speak of the devil. “Hey.”

“How’d the Skype meeting go?” He asks, kissing me on the top of the head as he passes behind my chair at the dining table. “Did you guys finally decide on the album cover art?”

“We... narrowed it down.”

“Dude, there were only three options to begin with.”

“And we eliminated one! That’s progress.” I argue pathetically.

Because it is pathetic.

We need to make a choice and send the finished design off to the manufacturer in two days, and we’ve been debating between three designs for almost two weeks. At first we all agreed on one, but then Zac changed his mind, and then Ike changed his mind, but neither of them changed their minds to the same design. If they had, I would have just gone along with whatever they’d chosen (after making them beg for a while, of course). But it ended up with us all wanting a different design, and none of us would budge. I finally caved today and took my favorite design off of the table, because I just don’t have the energy to argue over something so small anymore. Anyone who has ever worked with me will tell you just how exhausted I’d have to be to give up control over anything related to my music, even if it is something as seemingly insignificant as an album cover.

“Did you win one of them over?” Asks Tommy, his question tinged with a note of hope.

“No, I told them to fight it out between themselves and let me know when they’d made a final choice. I’m pretty sure it’s going to come down to a coin flip at this point.”

He raises his eyebrows at me in obvious surprise. “Wow. You’re turning into a pushover in your old age.”
“I’m not! I’m just learning to pick my battles and conserve my energy for more important things.”

“That’s what old people do.”

“Hey, which one of us is turning thirty-four next month?”

His face falls immediately, and he places his hand over his heart as he pouts at me. “Ouch.”

“Sorry, that was uncalled for.”

"You know what? Just for that, I'm not gonna invite you to take a shower with me." He informs me tersely, getting out of his chair and sauntering out of the room, and I make some pathetic sounds of protest as he goes.

The only reason I don’t put up much of a fight is because I know he doesn’t actually want my company right now. Not only because he's on day three of another necessary period of abstinence, but because it's not that kind of shower.

It's the kind you take when you want to wash everything away, even though deep down you know it's impossible. It's the first thing he does when he gets home after taking his mom to chemo; I noticed the pattern after the third appointment. I'm not sure if it actually makes him feel any better, because he's too good at pretending he's okay. It's an act that he puts on for Dia's sake, and I think he forgets to turn it off once it's "safe" for him to let his guard down.

He doesn't talk about it, not really. If I ask how it went, or how Dia is feeling, he'll give me the shortest answer he can without making it so vague that it invites more questions. I think she puts on as much of an act for him as he does for her, and I'm sure she can see through him just like he sees through her. It seems so pointless for them to keep pretending when neither of them is convincing anyone, such a waste of energy neither of them can spare. But I guess it's just something they need to do for each other right now.

After finishing up what I was working on when he came home, and giving him enough time to attempt to wash away the day, I head upstairs to our bedroom to see if he feels like talking. I'm not expecting miracles, and it wouldn't surprise me if all I get out of him is evasiveness disguised as flirting. He's damn good at that. What does surprise me is the sight of him standing in the bathroom, staring at his own reflection in the steamed up glass of the mirror above the sink. It's not like he
never looks at himself in the mirror, but it's usually only a brief glance, or to put on eyeliner.

Not to just... stare.

I can see myself approaching in the reflection, but he doesn't seem to notice. It makes me think that he's not even really looking, he's not seeing. Which means there's nothing I can do to avoid startling him when I make my presence known.

"Tommy?"

Just as I expected, he visibly flinches and gasps as he reaches out and grips the sink to steady himself. "Fuck! Why the fuck are you lurking behind me like a creeper?"

"I wasn't 'lurking'." I chuckle softly, slipping my arms around his waist from behind and placing a kiss to the side of his neck. "All I did was walk into the room and say your name. It's not my fault you were spacing out."

"I wasn't spacing out."

"What were you doing, then?"

"Just thinking about how shitty I look."

I don’t buy for a second that his appearance is the thing that had him so distracted when I came in here, but that doesn’t mean I’m just gonna let that completely inaccurate statement slide. “You do not look shitty! You look amazing, as usual.”

“Whatever. There’s like… three inches of my roots showing. I haven’t let my hair get this bad since you were in the hospital.”

“I don’t think it looks bad.”

He elbows me in the ribs and scowls at me as our eyes meet in the mirror. “You’re such a fucking
"I'm not lying. I look at you, and all I see is the most gorgeous guy I've ever laid eyes on. Even first thing in the morning, when your hair is sticking up like crazy, and you have pillow crease face, you're still more beautiful than any other guy out there."

"You know how you wear glasses sometimes? Maybe you should start wearing them all the time, 'cause your eyesight is obviously shot to hell."

This is clearly not an argument I'm going to win if we continue having it out loud, because he's too stubborn to let me win. So I declare victory in my head (because I was right), and try to bring the conversation back to what's actually bothering him.

If he chooses to tell me.

"Is there anything else on your mind, besides your hair?"

"No. I mean... just tomorrow, I guess." He mumbles so quietly that I almost can't hear him. But only almost.

"I thought you'd be a little more excited about it." I frown in concern, loosening my hold on him until he turns to face me. Well, he turns around, but he keeps his eyes downcast which makes it hard for me to tell what he's thinking. "This isn't about you having to get up close and personal with another plastic cup, is it?"

"No... not exactly."

"I know it's awkward, but maybe it'll be easier this time-"

"Or maybe I shouldn't be the one doing it."

"I... what do you mean?" I ask uncertainly, willing him to look at me. But when he finally does, the defeat that I can clearly see written all over his face only makes me worry more. "What's going on? You're not having second thoughts... are you?"
"No." He insists wholeheartedly. "You know how much I want this. I just... I'm not so sure we're doing the right thing, making me the biological dad."

"Where is this coming from?"

He shrugs one shoulder faintly before squirming out of my arms and walking away from me. "It's not like I haven't been thinking it the whole time."

"It's the first time you're mentioned it to me." I protest as I follow him into the bedroom. "Why don't you want to be the father?"

"I never said I don't want to be, I said I don't think I should be. There's a difference."

Oh, good. It's going to be one of those splitting hairs conversations that leaves me wanting to pull my hair out. "Okay, so why don't you think you should be the father?"

"Because... I just think it'd be better for the baby. We know you produce healthy, happy kids. We have five living, breathing examples of that! Who the hell knows what kind of shitty DNA I'm gonna be passing on."

"Tommy-"

"It's true! I mean, face it, my family doesn't have the best track record when it comes to health issues. I've dealt with depression and anxiety my whole life, my dad died before I turned thirty, my mom has cancer, it took Lisa forever to get pregnant... and now she's talking about getting some test to see if she has that cancer gene or whatever it was that made Angelina Jolie cut her tits off!"

"That doesn't mean anything." I try to argue, but he's already shaking his head in disagreement. "You're healthy. You've never had any major health issues-"

"Not yet."
"Don't say that." I sigh sadly, fighting like hell to keep my mind from dwelling on that statement. "You don't know what your health is going to be like in the future, you can't know that."

"Maybe not. But I do know that all of those egg donors we looked through had pretty fucking perfect family medical histories. If any of them had a history like mine, they probably never would've been accepted as a donor."

As badly as I want to freak out right now, I know that's the worst thing I could possibly do. He'll only dig his heels in and become more adamant about not being the biological father. So instead, I take a breath and silently remind myself to stay calm.

"I know that everything that's happened with your mom this past month has been really rough, and I totally understand why you're having second thoughts. But... please don't back out now."

"I told you, I'm not backing out entirely, I just think you should be the biological father."

"And I think you should be. Tommy... people have kids every day. People whose parents or grandparents have been sick, people who have been sick themselves. Hell, people with cancer even have their eggs and sperm frozen so that they can still have kids after they get treatment! Nothing and no one is perfect. Just because my family has had fewer health issues than yours, that's no guarantee-"

"No, but it still gives this kid a better shot." He insists as he drops down heavily onto the edge of the bed. "I... I don't know if I could ever forgive myself if they got sick because of me."

"Baby, even if they do get sick, you don't know that it'd be because of you." I point out gently, taking a step closer to the bed. "Kids get sick... people get sick, it's no one's fault, it just happens. I know that everything is crazy right now, and your mom being sick is scary, but don't let it stop you from having this."

"What difference does it make which one of us is the father? We're both gonna love the baby just the same anyway. The only thing I care about is that we get to do this together."

"Well... I'm sorry, but that's not the only thing I care about." I admit as I sit down beside him on the bed and take his hand in mine. "As much as I wanna do this with you, no matter what, I still really want this baby to be biologically yours."
“Why?” He whines wearily.

"Because... I wanna meet your kid." I guess I can take his eye roll as a sign that he thinks that's a stupid reason. But it's not stupid to me. "I'm serious. There's this person, this part of you, that is never going to exist if you don't go through with this. And that honestly breaks my heart a little. I don't want either of us to have to wonder what that person would've been like, or who they might have become."

"What if they're a terrible person?” He counters argumentatively, rendering me so frustrated that all I can do is collapse onto my back on the mattress and groan into my hands. "Or what if they never even get the chance to become a person because they get sick and die before they're out of diapers, because my genetic material is worthless?"

"It's not, though!” I insist earnestly, forcing myself to sit up again so that I can look him in the eyes. "You and Lisa basically share the same genes, and Bridget is an amazing, sweet, intelligent little girl—"

"Yeah, but she has David's genes to balance it out."

"And this baby will have the donor’s genes! But it doesn't even matter, because there is nothing wrong with you, or your 'genetic material'. You're the most amazing person I've ever met, and I can only imagine how amazing your kid is going to be."

"Stop trying to manipulate me with your stupid blue eyes, asshole.” He mutters, turning his face away from me so that he's less susceptible to the pleading puppy look that I was using on him. "You're not supposed to pull that shit during fights, you promised. It gives your a totally unfair advantage."

"Yeah, well, desperate times..." I tease him in an attempt to lighten his mood even a little. I can't tell if it worked or not, and I really am getting kinda desperate here. I don't want to manipulate him, but...

"Please?"

"Taylor—"

"I know you think I'm being unfair, and if I am, I'm sorry for that. It's just... we had a plan, you know? And I loved our plan, and I don't want it to change. Maybe that's selfish, but I'm kind of okay being selfish about this because it's that big of a deal to me. I want to raise your child with you."
"It's not mine, it's ours." He counters, not even trying to sound as determined as he was only a moment ago.

"You know what I mean."

For a while he doesn't respond at all, he sits silently beside me and stares at the wall while he faintly shakes his head. My heart isn't sure whether to start sinking, it's impossible to tell if he's about to give in or tell me to get over it because he's not willing to do it anymore.

Eventually he exhales a deep, defeated sigh. "Sometimes I really wish I didn't love you so fucking much. It'd make my life a hell of a lot easier."

"I'm sorry." I sympathize semi-seriously, fighting to control my smile and not seem too pleased with myself for winning him over. "I can try to be less lovable, if that'd help?"

"I'm just fucked up enough that I'd probably love you even more if you tried to make me love you less." He snorts derisively. "It's fine; I accepted how completely screwed I am when it comes to you a long time ago."

"At least you're completely screwed in the fun way when it comes to me, too." I nudge him playfully, finally coaxing one of those coveted smiles onto his face. "That's gotta count for something, right?"

"Don't flatter yourself."

"It's okay. I know you have to play it cool with me 'cause you're saving yourself for the hot date you have with that irresistible plastic cup."

"And I know you've never wanted to be a plastic cup so bad in you whole fucking life." He retorts playfully, grabbing a pillow from the head of the bed and hitting me in the face with it so hard that I legitimately fall backwards onto the mattress.

I try to grab the pillow from him, but it's kind of hard to get a grip on it when he's repeatedly swatting me around the head with it. When I do successfully grab a hold of the fabric, he still refuses to let go,
and we end up in a tug of war that results in him landing on top of me. This could get dangerous fast, and we both know it. The question is, do I have any self-control left over from the painfully similar situation we were in only a month ago?

I hope so, because it's pretty clear he doesn't.

"Don't make me push you off of the bed." I warn him through a soft chuckle as I try to dodge his attempts at kissing me. "I don't want to, but I will!"

"Go ahead." He taunts with a devilish smirk. "Maybe I'll land on my knees….

Damnit! "I know what you're trying to do, and it's not gonna work."

"Really?" His hand slips between our bodies, disappearing below my belt and leaving me squirming in a futile effort to avoid his touch. At least... I'm pretty sure I'm trying to avoid it. Either way, I fail. "I dunno... seems like it's working just fine."

I somehow manage to scrape together enough willpower to grab him by the wrist and yank his hand away from me before he can drive me any crazier than he already has. "You're not gonna get off to get out of being the biological father. If we have to reschedule this whole thing for next month just because you couldn't… contain yourself, we will."

"You're no fun."

"Oh, I'm plenty of fun." I inform him matter-of-factly, pushing him off of me and onto his back before leaning down and pecking his pouting lips. "And you can't have any."

He's scowling at me as I get off of the bed, and it's so damn adorable that I have to stop myself from kissing him again. It took almost all of the self-restraint I possess to stop him in the first place!

"Where are you going?" He asks in what I can only assume is the most pitiful voice he's capable of.

"To pick the kids up from school. It's almost three already."
"Shit, seriously?" He grabs the pillow he was hitting me with and holds it over his face to muffle his frustration.

"Amen." I laugh softly as I start to leave the room. "You can stay here, if you want? I can get Asta-"

"No, I’ll go." He grumbles.

"It's fine, I don't mind."

"I know, but I don't think I should be left alone in an empty house right now. I can't stop thinking about me, and you, and...."

"That cup? That'd be one hell of a threesome."

Next thing I know, there's a pillow flying across the room towards me. "Fuck you."

"Hey, maybe you could ask them for an extra cup to bring home?" I suggest, throwing the pillow back at him and knocking him back down onto the bed as he's about to stand up.

"Maybe I will. And maybe you can shove it up your ass." He snaps at me, fighting like hell to stop himself from cracking up over the look of displeasure on my face as he pushes himself off of the bed. "How's that for a threesome?"

"It'd only be a threesome if you were involved somehow."

"So... what? You want me to shove it up your ass?"

"Why do either of us have to shove it up my ass?!"

"Two reasons." He replies smugly before leaving the room with me in close pursuit. "One, because you're an asshole. And two, because you're asking for it."
"Isn't that basically just one reason worded two ways?"

"I hate you so fucking much right now."

"So that would be a yes, then?"

Either way, he's right. I am being an asshole, and I am totally asking for it. But I just can't seem to stop myself; he brings it out in me! Bickering with him over stupid, pointless bullshit is one of my absolute favorite things about being alive. It's hard to believe I spent so much of my life without this. And even harder to believe that get to spend the rest of my life doing it.

I never even realized what I was missing, and now that I have it, I really don't think I could live without it.
Chapter 41

Chapter Summary

As always, please remember that I’m not a medical professional. ;) I did A LOT of research on this subject (not just for this chapter, but for this fic), but that’s never a guarantee that I’m going to get it all right. If anything is wrong, just chalk it up to this being fiction. lol If Phoebe can get a positive pregnancy test on the same day she does the embryo transfer on 'Friends', I think I can get a few facts slightly wrong and still be forgiven... right?

![Image](https://i.imgur.com/3Q5Q5Q5.png)

Today is the day!

I guess I should be more specific; there are going to be a lot of important days coming up in the very near future, so “today is the day” is going to quickly lose all meaning. For example, I could be referring to the day Shauntae takes that first pregnancy test and (hopefully) tells us that she’s pregnant. But I’m not (sadly), because we’re not there. Yet.

The egg retrieval was late last week, and everything went well. The doctor retrieved ten eggs from our donor, and they were able to fertilize all of them. We’d talked with the doctor about following Holden and Ryan’s advice and having the embryos tested for chromosomal abnormalities, but she assured us that it would only increase our chances of implantation by about fifteen percent. And while part of me feels that every last percent counts, the odds are already pretty good that we’ll be successful anyway.
Tommy took a little more convincing, but between our doctor’s reassurances and my infectious (aka irritating) positivity, he eventually agreed to skip the chromosomal testing this cycle. I promised him that if we don’t get pregnant this time, we can do the testing when we try again with the remaining embryos that we’ve had frozen.

But I’m hoping like hell that we won’t be trying again.

Maybe it’s naive of me to think that we’re going to be lucky enough to have a baby on the first attempt. Holden and Ryan thought the same thing, and they wound up heartbroken. But the way I look at it, we have about a sixty to seventy percent chance of an embryo implanting, and we’re transferring two embryos, so... it’s a coin flip.

Heads we win.

One of those two flips has to be heads… right?

Maybe we should ask the doctor to transfer three embryos. Because three is supposed to be lucky. Third time’s the charm, best of three, etcetera. I don’t wanna have to make three attempts at IVF, so maybe if we just put three embryos in now, one will stick.

Or maybe we’ll end up with triplets, and then we’ll have eight kids, and TLC will be beating down our door, begging us to do a reality show.

“Dad?”

“Yeah, buddy?” I turn to River, trying to put all pregnancy thoughts on hold so that I can fully focus on the already living, breathing child that’s currently standing in front of me.

“Now that I’m nine, can I stay up until Ezra goes to sleep?”

Ever since his birthday earlier this month, he seems to be under the impression that everything in his life is going to be different. He wasn’t like this when he turned eight, but apparently being one year away from completing that all important first decade of life means that he’s entitled to watch R-rated movies (no), and have his own cell phone (no), and stay up until ten...
“Maybe.”

“Why maybe?” He whines, demonstrating how little he has actually matured in the past nine days.

“Because I need to talk to Tommy about it first.”

“Talk to me about what?” Asks Tommy as he walks into the kitchen with Viggo riding on his back.

“About why you have a six year on your back.” I tease while he half lowers and half drops Viggo onto the floor. “Did he forget how to walk?”

“No, I can walk.” Viggo informs me, grabbing a piece of bacon from the plate beside me on the counter. “But I’m tired today.”

“We had a deal.” Tommy elaborates. “I gave him a piggy back down here, and now he’s going to go to school without complaining about it.”

Not likely. “Good deal.”

“Tommy, can I stay up late like Ezra now that I’m almost ten?” River pleads pathetically, all but clasping his hands together in prayer. “Please?”

Tommy shrugs as he looks to me for assistance. “I don’t know… he’s still like four years older than you, dude.”

“That’s not a lot, though!”

“How about you stay up as late as Penny?” I offer. “It’s not as late as Ez, but it’s later than you go to bed now.”

“What about me?” Viggo pipes up through a mouthful of bacon. “Can I stay up as late as Penny?”
“Well…”

I want to say no, because he’s only six-and-a-half. He shouldn’t be staying up until nine-thirty, but if River is going to be, he kind of has to. They share a room, and I doubt River is stealthy enough to sneak into a dark bedroom and get into bed without tripping over a toy, or a stray shoe, and making enough noise to wake anyone in the building.

“How about we all stay up all night?” Suggests Tommy sarcastically. “Then we can all be cranky every day. Fun!”

“I won’t be cranky!” Viggo insists, crossing his heart. And his fingers. “I promise!”

“You just made me carry you down here because you were ‘too tired’ to walk.”

“But I’m not cranky.”

No, I believe his little sister has that emotion covered this morning. Just as I’m about to tell Viggo that he can stay up as late as River for a week and we’ll see how it goes, Asta struts into the kitchen with an incredibly discontent look on her face.

“I’m hungry.”

“Good, ‘cause breakfast it just about ready.” I assure her cheerfully as I lightly slap Viggo’s hand away from the bacon before he can steal another piece.

“What is it?” She scowls, apparently not appeased by the mere fact that food is on the horizon.

I can already tell that what I’ve made is not what she’s going to want. I just know. “Bacon, scrambled eggs, fruit-”

“I want pancakes.”
“Well, I don’t have time to make pancakes today, but I promise we’ll have them tomorrow.”

“But I don’t want them tomorrow.” She argues as her bottom lip begins to wobble and tears gather in her big brown eyes. “I want them now.”

“Oh boy…” Mutteres Tommy under his breath, taking a deep breath and a second to scrape together some much needed patience before lifting Asta into his arms. “What do we say about getting what you want?”

“That you can’t always.” She sniffles pitifully and wipes her damp eyes. “But-”

“And you are going to get what you want, just not right now.”

“But-”

“No buts.” He reminds her, using the back of his finger to brush away the tears that she missed. “You’ll get your pancakes tomorrow.”

“I really just want them today.” She sighs forlornly as she rests her head on his shoulder and sniffs a few more times for good measure. “I’m so sad that I don’t have p-pancakes.”

“I know, bug, but you’ll be fine. I promise.”

“Can I have your fruit with my breakfast?”

She can’t see the look on his face, but I can. The small smile that was on his lips a second ago vanished the moment she made her request. He loves fruit, it’s probably his favorite part of breakfast. But he loves her more, and there’s no way in hell he’s going to refuse her twice in such a short space of time.

“Sure.”

“Pushover.” I fake cough into my hand, leaving River and Viggo giggling in amusement as Tommy
glares at me. “Sorry. I had something in my throat.”

“Oh huh.”

“You know what, Asta? You can have my fruit instead of your dad’s.”

He might be a pushover for her, but I’m so far beyond being a pushover for him.

“If Asta’s not having Tommy’s fruit, can I have it?” Viggo quickly pipes up before River can beat him to it.

“No fair! Why do Viggo and Asta get extra fruit?!”

Oh boy…

The rest of our morning routine goes smoothly; it’s just like every other day. Except that it’s not, and we both know it. Every so often we’ll look at each other, we’ll catch each other’s eye, and we’ll share a smile. No one else would probably notice, they wouldn’t be able to see just how many emotions are hidden within that one, small exchange. Even I can’t put them all into words, I’m not sure some of them have names. I can’t remember the last time I felt like this. Maybe I never have.

But it’s been that way since the very first time he brought up the idea of us having another child. I was so excited by the idea of having a baby. I’m not talking about the fact that I was going to be a father again, but the possibility of it. I’ve never had that feeling before, and I had no idea how scary it is. For me, the idea of Natalie getting pregnant again was always kind of scary, but now I find myself afraid that Tommy and I aren’t going to have success with our first IVF attempt.

I want this so much. For both of us.

We pick Shauntae and Sam up at their house about half an hour before Shauntae’s appointment at the fertility clinic. They tried insisting that we didn’t have to go “out of our way”, but considering the fact that she’s about to (hopefully) have our future child transferred from a petri dish to her uterus, I think it’s the least we can do.
It’s the first time we’ve been to their house, and it’s basically how I pictured it based on the bits and pieces they’d told us. It’s small, but in a cute way rather than cramped. The front yard isn’t really a yard so much as a patch of concrete, but in the small amount of exposed ground they have around the edge of the house, they’ve made a respectable effort to start some kind of flower bed. It’s not their fault that the California sun is trying it’s hardest to incinerate everything they’ve planted. The exterior of the house is pale blue with white trim, which makes it stand out a little amongst all of the surrounding beige and peach stucco homes in their neighborhood.

We barely get to see the inside, because we’re running a bit late (shocking, I know). From the little we do see, it’s clear that their daughter is their world. Our kids are our world, too, but sometimes I feel as though we don’t have nearly enough pictures of them around the house, even though there’s more than one in every room. Shauntae and Sam have an entire wall in their living room dedicated to pictures of Stella, all in frames of different shapes and styles. The two of them are in some of the photographs, but the vast majority of them are of Stella by herself. And not a single one of them isn’t adorable; I could stand there and look at them all for hours.

But there’s no time for studying pictures of their child when we’re about to (hopefully) have one of our own.

“Are you guys nervous?” She asks us as I pull the car away from the curb outside their house.

“I guess…” Tommy replies with an uncertain shrug. “I’m not sure nervous is the right word for whatever the hell it is I’m feeling right now, but I can’t think of a better one, so…”

“Cautiously hopeful?” I offer as I reach across the gear shift and give his knee a reassuring squeeze.

“That’s two words.”

“No one said you could only use one.” I chuckle quietly.

“Oh. Well in that case, this is probably the happiest I’ve ever been while also feeling like I might puke at any minute. What was that, like twenty words?”

“About that.” Giggles Shauntae. “I’m glad you’re happy, if a little nauseous.”

“Try a lot nauseous.” He corrects her solemnly, turning in his seat a little to look at her. “I don’t even
“It’s a big deal.” Sam tells him. “I remember when Shauntae took her first pregnancy test, I was so jittery, I felt like I’d had about ten shots of espresso!”

“Fuck, I didn’t even think about the pregnancy test.” He mutters as he slumps in his seat. “If I’m this close to puking now, what am I gonna be like then?! ”

“Hopefully equally or less close to puking. But we have plenty of bathrooms, so if you need to throw up while Shauntae is taking the test, it’s not a problem.” I tease him, earning myself a back handed slap in the chest. “Hey, no hitting me while I’m driving! If I crash and kill us all, we can’t do the transfer, and then all of your nausea was for nothing.”

As casual and unaffected as I’m trying to act in an effort to keep Tommy’s nerves at bay, all this talk of pregnancy test taking isn’t doing much to keep me calm. Regardless of whether the transfer today is successful or not, Shauntae will be taking a pregnancy test in only a week from now. And whatever the results are, we’re going to have to hear them. We should probably discuss that moment and how we’ll want to handle it if the news isn’t good. But it kinda feels like we’d be jinxing it. All we’ve really discussed until now is when and where Shauntae will take the test. We all agreed that eight days post-transfer seemed reasonable, considering that our official beta test is scheduled for four days after that. And Shauntae offered to come over to our place to take the test once the kids are in school, which seemed to make the most sense.

If there’s only one line in that little window, we’re going to want to be in the privacy of our own home when we get the news. And we’re definitely not going to want our kids around to see our initial reactions.

Ezra is the only one who knows what’s going on, really. The others know that we’re still planning to have another baby, and that Shauntae is going to help us. But it didn’t seem right to keep them in the loop about every little step we take in this process. We’re keeping the pregnancy from most people until after the first trimester in an effort to protect ourselves in case something goes wrong. But we’re keeping it from the kids in an effort to protect them.

I doubt we’ll be able to hold off for three whole months, though. Natalie and I never did. I think the longest we ever waited before telling them that they were having another sibling was a month. It feels deceptive to keep something so huge a secret from them, especially something that is going to affect their lives in such a big way.

I think we’ll probably wait until after the seven week ultrasound, when we’ll (hopefully) see the
baby’s heartbeat. Not that there’s any guarantee that everything will be okay after that, but somehow it seems as though that would be the appropriate time to share this with them. Although, once they know, the odds of them keeping it a secret for another six weeks or so are slim to none, no matter how hard they try. So that whole ‘waiting until the first trimester is over to tell people’ thing might end up being pointless anyway.

After we’ve checked in at the clinic, Shauntae is ushered off quickly for some lab work. And probably to be poked and prodded by various people with thousands of dollars in med school debt. Which leaves Tommy, Sam and I to sit in the waiting room and try our hardest to pretend we’re not even slightly anxious. But it’s like I can feel Tommy’s desire to get up and pace. Or maybe it’s me who wants to pace; it’s kinda hard to separate his emotions from mine right now.

It feels like hours pass while we wait for someone, anyone, to come and let us know what’s going on. In reality, I’m just antsy and impatient, and it’s probably no more than thirty minutes before the doctor we’ve been working with comes to fetch us from the waiting room. She leads us back to a room where Shauntae is already resting on an exam table, wearing a powder blue gown and a smile that strikes me as a little… dopey.

“Hey.” She greets us with a relaxed sigh.

“Hey.” Sam smiles in amusement, walking over to the exam table and taking her hand. “How’s it going?”

“I’m great. They have the good drugs.”

That explains it. “Think you can hook us up?”

“Sure! You just have to let them put a catheter in your uterus.”

“I don’t have a uterus.” Tommy pouts at her, leaving me biting my lip to keep myself from laughing out loud. “If I did, we wouldn’t be here.”

“Well, since you are here, would you like to see the embryos before we begin the transfer?” Doctor O’Conner laughs softly.

“We can do that?” He asks before looking at me like I know more on this subject than he does. But I
don’t. I wasn’t expecting to be able to see the embryos today any more than he was. I figured the first we’d see of our baby would be the ultrasound.

Assuming there was a baby to see.

Rather than answering Tommy’s question verbally, Doctor O’Conner turns her chair towards a monitor beside her, switching it on and adjusting a few things before moving aside so that we can see better. On the screen we can just about make out two little blobs, each surrounded by a faint circle. I don’t know what it was I was expecting them to look like, maybe I had no expectations. I also don’t know what the appropriate reaction is. I feel like I should say that they’re cute or something, because one of them is hopefully going to become our future child. But they’re not really cute at all. They’re… lumpy.

“Wow…” Tommy leans a little closer, narrowing his eyes for a second before casting me a cheeky glance over his shoulder. “The one on the left kinda looks like you.”

“Thanks.”

“I think they’re cute!” Exclaims Shauntae as she gazes at the screen in awe. “They’re like little bubbles.”

“They are!” Sam agrees. “I was trying to think of a way to describe them, and I couldn’t. But bubbles is totally accurate.”

“If it’s okay with you guys, I’m gonna call one of them bubble.” She beams at us, placing her hands over her tummy as though they’re already in there. “And the other one… um… bean!”

“Which one’s which?” Asks Sam curiously.

“Hmm… the one on the left is bubble, because it’s just a little bit more bubblier.”

“I like it.” Tommy nods in approval. “Maybe we could use one of those as a middle name or something? If Bean is a good enough middle name for Kurt Cobain’s kid, it’s good enough for mine.”
I smile fondly as I curl my arm around his waist. “We can figure middle names out later.”

“It’s just going to take us another few minutes to get everything ready to go.” Doctor O’Conner tells us as she turns off the monitor. “But before we do, I wanted to check in with you all and make sure you still want to transfer two embryos today?”

“Oh… um…” My eyes shift from the doctor’s face to Tommy’s, and I can already see in his eyes that the last thing he wants right now is a change of plans. Especially one that could potentially reduce our chances of success. “Is there any reason we shouldn’t?”

“Not at all. I just like to ask one last time before we start the procedure.” She assures me with a small smile. “If you’re sure, and Shauntae is sure…”

“I’m sure.” She shrugs, and it’s hard to tell if she’s so laid back about the whole thing because of whatever drug it was they gave her, or because that’s just how she is in general. “Whatever you guys want to do is fine by me.”

“What are the chances that both embryos will take?” Asks Sam curiously.

“It’s hard to say. Sometimes both will implant, sometimes only one, and sometimes neither will. There’s really no way of knowing ahead of time.”

“If Shauntae is fine with us transferring two, I wanna stick with two.” Tommy tells me without hesitation. “I still think we have a better shot this way.”

“Okay.” I nod, pecking him lightly on the forehead before turning my attention back to Doctor O’Conner. “Two it is.”

“Great! Why don’t the three of you head back out to the waiting room, and a nurse will come and find you when we’re ready to start.”

That statement takes me by surprise, because I didn’t realize we were going to be in the room when the transfer actually happened. We discussed the procedure with Doctor O’Conner, but it wasn’t made clear that we would be present for it. I’m definitely not going to turn the opportunity down, though!
If the initial wait felt long, the second one is even worse. It’s like we’re constantly getting closer and closer to finally making this happen. But with every step we take comes a pause before we can take another. And when you want something as badly as we want this, the smallest delay feels never-ending. I don’t even want to imagine how excruciatingly long the next week will be. But at the same time, part of me is okay with that particular wait. As much as I want to get to the moment when Shauntae will take that all important test, I’m terrified of it, too.

For the first time in my entire life, I’m dreading the possibility of a negative pregnancy test.

When the nurse eventually does take us back to Shauntae’s room, Doctor O’Conner appears to be finishing up whatever preparation they needed to go through before the transfer. Shauntae still looks pretty calm, which I find impressive. She’s not exactly in the most comfortable position imaginable, and even though there’s a sheet covering her legs, it still feels as though we should apologize for coming in here, or at least cover our eyes or something. But I guess it’s something we should get used to if we plan to be there when the baby is actually being born. So I make a beeline for the head of the exam table (with Tommy close behind me), and follow Doctor O’Conner’s instructions for us to focus on the monitor again.

This time the image on the screen is an ultrasound of Shauntae’s uterus. And while we’re busy trying to figure out exactly what we’re looking at, someone in scrubs and a mask comes into the room and carefully hands a small tube to Doctor O’Conner. She details practically every move she’s making as she continues the procedure, explaining to us what it is we’re seeing on the screen. We watch a thin, white line appear, and she explains that it’s the catheter entering the uterine cavity. It’s so crazy to think that, any second now, what will hopefully grow to be our baby will be in that tiny little space we’re staring at. I feel Tommy’s fingers make a grasp for mine, and I immediately take his hand and hold on tightly.

“If you keep watching closely, you should see a little flash of white coming from the catheter when the embryos are released. Ready?”

“I’m so far past ready.” Tommy laughs nervously as his grip on my hand tightens a little more.

“Okay. One… two… three.”

“Holy… did you see that?!”

Honestly, no. I wasn’t watching the screen when it happened, I was watching him. And I don’t
regret it one bit. Because the look on his face when he saw that “flash” was incredible. I’m not sure if I’ve ever seen him so completely in awe of anything before. But I know he’ll be annoyed that I missed it, and I don’t want to ruin this for him by admitting it, so I just smile and nod.

“And that’s it.” Doctor O’Conner tells us cheerfully. “We’ll just check the catheter to make sure both embryos were transferred, but if everything looks good, we’re done!”

“That was so cool.” Sam shakes her head in amazement before leaning down to kiss Shauntae tenderly. “You did great, babe.”

Shauntae waves the compliment off as she rolls her eyes. “I didn’t do anything.”

“No, you definitely did something.” I assure her wholeheartedly. “Thank you.”

“Yeah. Whether this works or not… we can’t even tell you how much it means to us that you’re doing this, you know? You’re pretty fucking awesome.”

“Stop, both of you! You’re gonna make me cry.”

“Get used to it.” I smirk, reaching over to give her hand a grateful squeeze. “It’s not stopping anytime soon.”

Verbal praise and appreciation isn’t all she’s going to have to get used to. Once the doctor has cleared her to leave the clinic, we take her over to a hotel in Beverly Hills. She was aware that we’d booked her a room for two nights, because she’s supposed to rest after the transfer. And we know it’s almost impossible to rest at home when you’re a parent. But she has no idea that we got a list of her favorite things from Sam, ranging from flowers and candy to movies and music, and stocked the room with them before she arrived. We drop them both off at the hotel without venturing inside with them, so we don’t get to see the look on her face when she walks into the room, but we both get texts just before we arrive home telling us that we’re crazy, and that she promises to take the very best care possible of ‘bubble’ and ‘bean’.

“Do you think it’s gonna work?” Tommy asks me, collapsing onto the couch in the family room with his eyes glued to the ultrasound picture Doctor O’Conner printed out for us. “It’s like… I don’t wanna get my hopes up, but… it really felt like everything went great. Didn’t it?”
“It did.” I concur as I take a seat beside him, watching him stare intently at the tiny white speck in a sea of blacks and grays.

“But maybe it feels like that every time. Maybe everyone thinks it went well right up until they find out it didn’t.”

“Maybe.”

He finally looks up from the picture in his hands, possibly for the first time since the doctor handed it to him. “What’s wrong? You’re really quiet.”

“Nothing’s wrong.” I promise him, shifting a little closer until he accepts my unspoken invitation to snuggle up against me. “I’m in the same place you are; trying not to get my hopes up even though everything that happened at the clinic this morning makes it pretty hard not to.”

“I feel like an idiot for being so obsessed with this thing.” He admits with a soft chuckle as he holds the picture out to me. “It’s a fucking dot. Like… if I didn’t know where to look, I wouldn’t even notice it.”

“I don’t think you’re an idiot. It might be our baby’s first picture.”

I can feel his cheek move against my shoulder when he smiles, just as I can feel that same smile fade. “What if it’s not? What’re we supposed to do with this? Just throw it out and try again?”

“I don’t know about the throwing it out part, but… yeah. We try again. And we keep trying until it works.”

He heaves a deep sigh and nuzzles his nose into the crook of my neck, all but curling up on the couch beside me. Something about the way his body molds to mine so seamlessly makes me want to wrap myself around him and protect him. But as always, it’s impossible. No matter how hard I try, there’s nothing I can do to keep any pain and disappointment at bay. They come out of nowhere and slip past every defense I try to throw up. I can’t stop bad things from happening, and I can’t keep him from hurting when they do.

All I can do is hope like hell that that there’ll be nothing I need to protect him from this time.
Chapter 42

Chapter Summary

TOMMY CHAPTER!

If you ever start to doubt that the Universe has it out for you, find something to look forward to. Get really excited about it, count down the days... and then pull your fucking hair out as time suddenly starts to move slower than it ever has before in your entire life!

Ever since the embryo transfer last week, time has been crawling by at a painfully slow rate. I’ve tried to stay busy and not think about it, but it’s totally impossible to keep it off of my mind for more than five minutes at a time. How the hell am I supposed to stop wondering if Shauntae is pregnant or not? It’s not like it’s no big deal. And I keep telling myself that it’s okay if it turns out that the IVF didn’t work; we can try again. But deep down I know I’m gonna be totally fucking crushed. I’ve been trying to come up with healthy ways to handle the disappointment, ‘cause it’s not like I have the best track record. I don’t want to take it out on Taylor or the kids by being a mopey shithead for weeks.

I haven’t had a whole lot of luck coming up with non-destructive coping skills, to be honest. They all seem like total bullshit. At least, that’s what that bitchy little voice in my head keeps telling me when I consider the idea of not drinking too much and refusing to talk about my feelings.

I need to come up with something pretty fucking fast, though, because Shauntae’s gonna be peeing
on a stick tomorrow morning whether I’m ready or not.

Thankfully, I have plenty to do today to keep my mind off of everything. Well… maybe not “thankfully”. It’s kinda hard to be thankful about taking my mom to chemo. It’s kinda hard to be thankful about anything that’s happening to her right now. I know I should just be grateful that she’s alive, and that she’s hopefully going to beat the cancer. But right now she doesn’t look capable of keeping her eyes open, let alone beating a life threatening illness.

Not all days are this bad for her; some days she just seems a little weak, but mostly like herself. Chemo days are the worst, which I knew would be the case before she even started getting it. But it’s like… you don’t really know until you’re in it. I knew she was going to feel sick, and her hair would probably start falling out, and she wasn’t going to feel all that great. But it’s so much fucking worse than I imagined. And I have to sit here and watch her get poison pumped into her body, and chat with her like everything’s totally normal. Like she’s not in pain, and miserable, and more than likely going to spend the rest of the day curled up in bed feeling like absolute shit.

“What do you need?” I ask when I notice her trying to reach for the bag beside her chair. “Let me get it.”

Normally she’d protest and insist she can get it herself, but right now she doesn’t have the energy to argue. “There should be some chapstick in the side pocket.”

“There’s two. Do you want the cherry or the strawberry?”

“Either is fine.”

Strawberry it is. “Do you need me to put it on for you?”

“I think I can just about manage.” She tells me teasingly as I pass it to her. But I notice her hands trembling slightly as she fumbles with the small plastic cap of the chapstick. “My fingers have just been a little tingly lately, that’s all. It’s like having pins and needles.”

I literally have to clamp my damn hands between my knees to stop myself from reaching over, snatching the chapstick out of her hands, and removing the cap for her! “Did you talk to your doctor about it?”
“No, but Lisa said it’s just a side effect of the chemotherapy. I looked it up online and it says it should start to go away once I’m done with treatment.”

“So you’re just like stuck with it until then?” I frown disapprovingly. “They can’t do anything about it?”

“They’re doing everything they can, honey. I’m already on medication for the pain and the nausea… they can’t fix every little side effect.”

Why not? Why hasn’t someone figured out a way to make this entire fucking process painless and easy? The amount of time and money spent on trying to cure cancer, and all they’ve come up with is this? It’s fucking ridiculous.

“What time is Shauntae coming over to take the pregnancy test tomorrow morning?” She asks in a blatant attempt to lighten my mood.

“Early. Like right after we take the kids to school.”

“And you promise you’ll call me as soon as you have the results?”

“You’ll be the first to know, I swear.” I smile faintly. “Just… don’t get your hopes up or anything. It probably didn’t even work.”

“You don’t know that.” She argues with a dismissive (and tired) wave of her hand. “There’s no reason to think that the test won’t be positive.”

“Because we’re on such a lucky streak lately?” I counter sarcastically as I gesture to our overly sterile surroundings.

“It’s not about luck. I know you don’t believe in God, but I do. And I believe that he has a way of bringing things into our lives to help us through the more difficult times.”

This should be good.
I can’t wait to hear how she thinks God is gonna counterbalance her chemo. “Oh yeah?”

“Well, just look at Bridget.”

“What about Bridget?”

“She came along at the perfect time. Lisa had been trying for over a year to have a baby, and she and David were on the verge of looking into alternative options. And then only a month after we lost your father, Lisa found out that she was pregnant. It gave us all something good to focus on when we needed it the most.”

Can’t argue with logic like that. God didn’t stop my dad from dropping dead, but he did help my sister get knocked up to ease the pain of his passing.

Makes total sense to me.

And I’m sure he’s just chomping at the fucking bit to help two gay guys have a baby. A baby conceived in a petri dish and injected into the uterus of a lesbian who is being paid big bucks to carry it to term.

I bet he’s all over that shit.

“And Taylor.” She adds, just when I think she’s done making her very weak point. “You met Taylor just before your dad died. I’m sure having him in your life at that time made a world of difference.”

Fuck.

That’s actually a good point.

But I still don’t believe God had anything to do with that. Mostly because I don’t believe God even exists, so it’s kinda hard to give him credit for anything. Yes, Taylor came into my life right when I was about to need him the most, even though I never could have known that the night we met. That
doesn’t mean some all powerful being was watching over us, moving us around like chess pieces in a well played game. It was a coincidence. No one and nothing is responsible for making it happen, and they sure as hell aren’t responsible for anything that happened between us after that night. We made every decision that got us to where we are now ourselves; the good, the bad, and the ugly.

Besides, if God gets credit for me meeting Taylor, doesn’t he also get credit for striking down the mother of five innocent children so that we could end up together?

Oh, right, I forgot. God isn’t responsible for that kind of thing, he’s only responsible for the good stuff. I guess Satan killed Natalie off, and then God came in and cleaned up after him? And Satan also gave my mom cancer, and now God is apparently going to fix that via... IVF?

Why he couldn’t have just cured her fucking cancer before we even got to this point, I don’t know.

What I do know is that asking these kinds of questions will never get me any kind of satisfactory answers, it’ll only piss people off. And the last thing I want to do right now, the last thing my mom needs me to do, is start debating religion with her.

So I keep my mouth shut.

Once her chemo is finally finished for the day, I take her back home and try to help her get comfortable, which is a pretty impossible task. Some days she feels better in bed, some days she prefers the couch. Most days, neither one is better than the other. It doesn’t really matter where she is, as long as she can curl up and try to sleep the worst of it away. When she can’t sleep, I’ll watch TV with her or talk to her to take her mind off of it. It’s easier for both of us if she sleeps, though. She’s less aware of how shitty she feels, and I don’t feel like it’s totally my responsibility to make her feel better.

Thankfully today was a sleeping day, so all I had to do once I got her settled was hang out until Lisa showed up for her “shift”. That probably sounds bad, like we view it as a job or a chore to take care of our sick mother. But it’s not like that. In fact, we usually have to force each other to leave when our “turn” is over. It always feels so fucking wrong to go home, even though I know Lisa is there and is probably doing a way better job at helping mom than I could.

I can’t wait to get home and take a shower, though.

The hospital smell lingers like cigarette smoke. It makes me wanna burn my clothes. I guess washing
them is probably just as effective and a hell of a lot less wasteful (but also a hell of a lot less satisfying). I cannot fucking wait until mom’s chemo is over for good, and the cancer is gone. Then I won’t have to watch her suffer anymore. And as an added bonus, I won’t have to set foot in a goddamn hospital again.

Well... not until our baby is born.

Fuck.

So much for not thinking about the whole pregnancy test thing.

It’s impossible to remain pissy and frustrated when I get home. The first thing I hear after opening the front door, aside from the sound of Duke’s claws on the floor as he makes a mad dash across the room to greet me, is the sound of Taylor singing along to the music coming from his iPhone speakers in the kitchen. At first I don’t recognize the song, but as I make my way through the house to find him, it starts to sound a little more familiar. It’s one of the songs from the new Hanson album.

Ten bucks says he’s trying to memorize his own lyrics.

Since he’s totally wrapped up in whatever food he’s preparing and the song he’s singing, he’s oblivious to the fact that I’m watching him. And I don’t intend to clue him in just yet, because I don’t want him to stop. If you could see him chopping vegetables in perfect time to the music, while simultaneously shaking his ass like Beyonce, you’d understand. My day just got a hell of a lot better.

Unfortunately for me, Duke is nowhere near as stealthy as I am. He wants all of the attention that I’m currently paying Taylor, and when he doesn’t get it, he starts whining at me. Taylor immediately turns around to see what’s wrong with the damn dog, and as soon as he sees me standing here he turns the music down and stops dancing. I’m pretty sure I’m pouting right now, judging by the smirk that just appeared on his face.

“How long have you been standing there.”

“Not long enough.”

Without another word, he turns away from me again, cranks the volume on his iphone speakers back up, and resumes his previous performance. I’m torn between staying where I am and enjoying the
show, or going over there and wedging myself between the kitchen counter and his gyrating hips. But before I can decide, he glances at me over his shoulder and nods in the direction of the kitchen island.

“You’ve got mail.”

“What is it?”

He shrugs and refocuses on the carrots he’s currently slicing. “No idea. But I had to sign for it.”

“Shit, who’s suing me?” I sigh, snatching up the Express Mail envelope (which very likely doesn’t contain legal documents). After tearing it open and reaching inside, I find there are no documents of any kind. Not unless the neon pink post-it stuck to the front of a copy of the new Phases album counts. “Dear Tommy, Just a little token of our gratitude. We could’ve done it without you—”

“Don’t you mean ‘couldn’t have done it without you’?” Chuckles Taylor.

“No, it very clearly says could’ve.” I inform him, holding it up for him to see. “Dear Tommy, Just a little token of our gratitude. We could’ve done it without you. But we didn’t. Love, Alex.”

“Like he even needed to sign it. That note had ‘Alex’ written all over it.” He shakes his head as I drop the envelope and the album back onto the island and turn my attention to stealing whatever I can off of Taylor’s chopping board before he can smack my hand away.

But apparently he’s too interested in the album to care how much of his carefully prepared food I consume. I think I manage to stuff about five pieces of carrot in my mouth before he interrupts me.

“Uh… you might wanna see this.” He tells me, holding the CD out to me again.

“I did see it.” I somewhat coherently reply through my mouthful, because I’m too impatient to wait until I’m done chewing.

“Did you read the back?”
“No.” I frown as I take the album from his outstretched hand. Despite the smug smile on his face, I feel an increasing sense of dread as I turn it over. At first I can’t see anything remarkable about it. It’s like the back of most albums. There’s a track listing, and copyright info, and… “What the…”

“Before you freak out, try to remember that this is a good thing. I know you didn’t want credit-”

“This isn’t credit, this is a total fucking lie!” I exclaim, blinking at the words on the back of the CD incase I somehow misread them. “They’re fucking with me, right? They made this copy as a joke, but the ones they’re actually selling to people don’t have this shit on them?”

“I don’t think it’s a joke.” He laughs quietly. “I’m pretty sure you’re the only one who thinks it is.”

“I did not fucking co-produce this album! I wasn’t even there when they recorded any of the final versions of the songs!”

“But you were there when they wrote half of them.”

“So were you, and I don’t see your name on here!” I protest adamantly as he pulls me closer and slips his arms around my waist.

“I was in the room, yes. But all I really did was bring them beer and nachos, and offer encouragement. I didn’t help them work through stuff like you did. You totally knew what they were going for and you helped them get there. Alex told me that the stuff you worked on with them shaped the sound for the entire album, whether you were there when they wrote and recorded the rest of it or not.”

“You knew about this?!”

“I didn’t, I swear.” He assures me, kissing me lightly on the lips. “Can you just… take a deep breath and try to feel good about this?”

“No.”
“Okay, then how about you just take a deep breath?”

I don’t mean to actually do it, because I’m not a child or a dog; I don’t follow commands. But I guess I need it, because it does kinda help. “I just… don’t like people thinking I’m something I’m not.”

“I know, and that’s totally reasonable.” He smiles, which I know means he’s about to point out why he still considers my reaction un reasonable. “The problem is, you don’t always realize or acknowledge what you are. You don’t see in yourself what other people see in you. You don’t see how much you’re capable of, but they do. I do.”

“I still think this is bullshit.” I mutter petulantly.

“I know.”

“I’m gonna kick Alex in the nuts the next time I see him.”

“I know.” He nods as he kisses me again. “And I’m sure he knows it, too.”

I seriously have no idea how I’m supposed to feel about this. I’m sure anyone else would feel flattered, appreciated, probably even proud. And maybe I do feel those things, deep down, underneath all of the doubt, and anxiety, and denial. I never imagined I’d get a producer credit on an album, not unless it was my own. And that wouldn’t really count in my eyes, because I make my music alone, so who the hell else would I put down as producer?

Hell, this one doesn’t really count in my eyes, either, because I totally didn’t do anything to deserve it!

I spend the rest of the afternoon debating whether or not I wanna tell Isaac about this when we finally get together for drinks tonight. It seems like something I should mention; it’s kind of a big deal, even if I don’t plan on making a big deal about it. But I already know he’s just gonna echo Taylor’s opinion on the subject instead of siding with me and declaring it ridiculous.

After all of the post-school chaos has passed, and dinner has been eaten, and Asta is in bed, I take what little energy I have left and drag myself out of the house to head over to Isaac and Sophie’s. I’ve only been to their new house a couple of times, including when I helped them move in, and it’s been so fucking long since I’ve been there, or seen either of them, that I find myself taking a wrong
turn at one point and heading towards their old place. It was kinda just instinct, I’ve been there so many times over the last few years, it was almost like a second home to me for a while. Not that their new place isn’t great, it’s definitely an upgrade in terms of space and location. But it’ll probably never beat that old apartment in my eyes.

I wish I could say that seeing Isaac again felt totally natural and comfortable, like I just hung out with him last week and he hasn’t been gone for months. But it’s the longest we’ve ever gone without seeing each other. And even though we still text each other a lot, and he calls from time to time when he’s not crazy busy or on another continent, it still takes us a little while to fall back into our old, familiar groove.

I hate it.

I know I should just suck it up and deal with the fact that shit happens, and people aren’t always going to be around as much as they once were, and friendships change, and life gets in the way. But I feel like I’ve been doing too much of that this past year or so, and I’m kind of sick of it. It makes it hard not to question whether or not I’m the problem. When a couple of people disappear from your life completely, or just stop showing an interest in anything you do, that fucking blows. But whatever; it happens. When it feels like you’ve lost contact with a hell of a lot of the people you once called friends, though, when your relationships boil down to nothing but a tweet here and there every other week, and when those tweets start to go unanswered… you start to wonder if it’s something you’re doing that’s making people not give a shit anymore.

In some cases I know it was my fault. At least partly. I let friendships fall by the wayside, I wasn’t showing up and putting in the effort. Not that anyone else was, either, but I still could have. It seemed that it was mostly the friendships I had before I started working with Adam that suffered from unintentional neglect, and luckily most (if not all) of those people have welcomed me back into their lives like I never left. I guess that’s how you know who’s worth the time and trouble.

It’s kinda part of the reason why I’ve decided to put everything that happened with Adam behind me and try to forgive him. I don’t know that we’ll ever be close again, but I figure that if he’s willing to admit that he was an ass for basically ignoring me for months, and for showing pretty much zero concern for my feelings after he fired me, I can give him a second chance.

The other part of the reason I decided to forgive him is because I was sick and tired of feeling guilty for not forgiving him. I couldn’t just forget about the five years of friendship we shared before everything fell apart. I missed it. Sometimes I miss everything about that time in my life; all of the places we went, the people he introduced me to (most of whom dropped off the face of the Earth right around the same time he did), the insane shit we got into...

It actually kinda hurts to think about it all. Because it’s gone now. Most days it’s like it never even
happened. And I feel like a naive child for thinking for a single second that it would never end. That the music would never stop, and the friendships would last a lifetime.

I’m not the kind of guy who believes crap like that; I know better.

“Tommy?”

“Hmm?” I feel almost dazed as I look up at Isaac to find him holding a bottle of beer out to me. “Thanks.”

“You okay?” He frowns, taking his seat on the sun lounger beside mine. “You totally spaced out.”

A year ago, hell, even just a few months ago, I would have told him exactly what was on my mind with barely a moment’s hesitation. “I was just… looking at the stars.”

“Right.” He snorts softly before raising his drink to his lips. “You mean the three of them you can see?”

“It’s nice out here.”

“Are you feeling okay?”

“What? I like your patio. Why’s that so weird?”

“I don’t know. You just seem totally out of it.” He shrugs. “Maybe you’re just mellowing out in your old age.”

“Fuck you. You’re the old one here.”

With a proud smirk, he tips his beer bottle in my direction. “And I’m mellow as fuck.”
“You always have been. I miss being around that all the time; I think it was good for me. You were the Ernie to my Bert.”

“Sesame Street references? You’re such a dad! I love it.”

“Good, ‘cause it’s not changing anytime soon.” I point out as I take another sip of my drink. “Even if it turns out that Shauntae’s not pregnant.”

“Well, yeah, it’s not like you guys are just gonna quit if you don’t get the results you want on the first try, right?”

“Right.”

“But I have a feeling it’s gonna work out.” He assures me confidently.

“You and everyone else who knows about it, apparently.”

“That’s gotta be a good sign!”

“Either that or you’re all just too fucking positive for your own good.”

He rolls his eyes, dropping his head back against the sun lounger in defeat. “I take it back. You haven’t mellowed out one bit.”

“I’m serious. I mean, I get that people want to be optimistic or whatever, and they all probably think it makes me feel better to hear about all the good feelings they have. But what if you’re all wrong? What if she takes the test tomorrow and it’s negative? I don’t wanna let everyone else’s positivity blind me to that, ‘cause it’s gonna fucking suck.”

“And you think it’s gonna suck less if you don’t get your hopes up?” He asks knowingly.

“No, I know it won’t.” I sigh as the tension begins to creep back into every muscle in my body. “I wish it was over already, I just wanna know so I can get on with my life. All this waiting around and
wondering is driving me completely fucking insane. With the surrogacy thing, with my mom… it’s like nothing that matters is in my control at all right now.”

“I know it feels that way, and in some cases it probably is that way, and there’s nothing anyone can do to change that. But even though you might not be able to change what’s going on with your mom, there’s plenty you can do to make it easier on her. You’re already doing it! And with the surrogacy stuff… I can’t even imagine how totally frustrating it is to have everything be out of your hands. And I know you can’t control how you’ll feel tomorrow if the test does turn out to be negative. But no matter how you feel, you can control whether or not you try again or throw your hands up and quit. And you can control that as many times as you have to, which hopefully will be zero, until you get that positive test. And then you get to be a dad again. And you really will have absolutely zero control over anything for the next eighteen years! So, if you think about it… this is actually good practice.”

Goddamn, I’ve missed his special brand of positivity. “Thanks… that actually helps.”

“Don’t sound so surprised. I’m very wise.” He informs me with a cheeky wink.

“I know. Just goes to show that looks can be deceiving.”

“Hey!” He scowls at me, lifting his leg off of his sun lounger so that he can swing it towards mine and kick me. “Fucker.”

“That’s my name, don’t wear it out.”
I may have gone a little crazy at some point tonight.

Actually, there’s no ‘may have’ about it; I just plain did.

I can pin-point exactly when it happened. I was fine when the kids came home from school this afternoon, and I felt totally normal during dinner. Even after Tommy left to spend the evening at Isaac’s, and I was hanging out and watching a movie with the kids, nothing seemed out of the ordinary. But then they went to bed, and there was no one around to distract me, nothing to take my mind off of everything that’s been going on lately, and everything that’s coming up in the next few months.

Or tomorrow morning…

So I did what any insane person would do. I started cooking.

And I kinda couldn’t stop.

Which is why it’s almost one o’clock in the morning, and my kitchen is trashed, and there are two lasagnas, a pot pie, and about fifty chocolate chip cookies cooling on any spare counter space I could find.
“What the actual fuck?”

The sound of Tommy’s voice surprises me so much that I almost knock over a stack of pots and pans as I spin around to face him. The expression on his face as he takes in the disaster area before him matches his stunned exclamation. And now he’s looking at me like I’m some mad scientist whose latest experiment blew up and destroyed our kitchen.

“I can explain.” Kind of. “It’s not as bad as it looks.”

“It looks like you used pretty much every fucking cooking utensil and dish we own.”

“But… every utensil.”

He shakes his head in bewilderment as he takes a few slow, cautious steps further into the room. “What… I mean… why?”

“I don’t know.” I sigh guiltily, slumping against the kitchen counter behind me and almost immediately feeling something damp begin to seep through the back of my t-shirt. I push myself away from it, pulling at the fabric of my shirt and trying to crane my neck to see what it is. “Shit…”

“Tomato sauce on your t-shirt is like the smallest issue we have right now.” He tells me matter-of-factly as I begin pulling the shirt over my head. “Dude, what the fuck are you doing?”

“I’ve gotta wash it out before it stains.” I mutter on my way over to the sink, distractedly turning the cold water on. “I love this shirt.”

“I know you can’t see yourself right now, but if you could, you would be as concerned for your sanity as I am.”

“Who said I’m not concerned for my sanity?”
“Well, you seem more concerned about your t-shirt than your sanity, so…”

“Maybe that’s because there’s a chance my t-shirt can still be salvaged,” I retort as I scrub the fabric in a desperate attempt to get every last trace of sauce out. But Tommy’s hand appears out of nowhere and grabs my wrist to stop me. “I’m almost done.”

“You’re completely done.” He reaches out with his other hand and turns off the water. “So completely done.”

“But…”

“What’s going on? When I left you were totally fine, and now you’re like… this. And whatever this is, it’s freaking me the hell out. So I need you to stop.”

“I’m sorry. I just… I don’t know. I guess I panicked.”

His brow furrows in concern, and his grip on my wrist becomes more tender than tight. “About what?”

“Everything.” I exhale a tired, hopeless sigh. “The complete lack of control feels like I have over everything.”

“I get that.” He smiles softly, his fingers drifting down to lace with mine. “What I don’t get is how that resulted in this.”

“Me either. Maybe… maybe I just needed to feel like I was in control of something.”

“Which was… what? Dinner and dessert for the next week?”

“No.” I roll my eyes, chuckling softly. “You know this isn’t enough to feed our kids for a week. Three days, maybe. But… that’s a start. I just… I wanted to try to do something to help.”

“Help who?”
“You. I’m leaving for Tulsa next week, and you’re gonna be dealing with everything here by yourself. So I wanted to do something to make things easier on you, and all I could think of was making some meals so that at least that’s one less thing you have to think about.”

“And I really appreciate that. But you do know that I can go to like…Whole Foods or Trader Joe’s or something and buy pre-made meals that I just have to throw in the oven for an hour? You didn’t have to spend all night slaving away in here like Bobby Flay on crack.”

“I know. I just hate that I’m leaving while everything is so messed up and stressful. I should be here with you-”

“You will be.” He insists. “You’re gonna be home two days a week, ‘cause you’re a fucking idiot. Not that I’m not glad you’ll be home that often, but you’re still an idiot.”

I heave a deep, weary sigh, wishing that his words did anything to reduce the amount of guilt I feel over abandoning him when he needs me the most. “It doesn’t feel like enough, though. Most days the two of us have to push ourselves to the limit to keep everything around here running semi-smoothly, especially lately. And now I’m not going to be around most of the time, and you’re going to be dealing with it alone.”

“I won’t be dealing with it alone. Jenna already said she’s gonna come over a couple of times a week to do homework with the kids, and Ezra’s been going for some kind of award in good behavior lately. It’s like he woke up one day and decided he enjoys doing the dishes or something.”

“True…”

I think it’s less about him enjoying it and more about wanting to help out in some way. Not that he isn’t usually helpful, but ever since he found out about Dia being sick, he’s been making an extra effort to take any small amount of stress off of Tommy that he can.

“You need to stop stressing yourself out.” He tells me confidently. “I’ve got this.”

The grin that spreads across my face is immediate and completely outside of my control. I don’t think there’s any other reaction I could have had to hearing those words from him. Even just a year ago, being in this same situation would have left him a nervous wreck, worrying that he wouldn’t be able to handle it all, that he wouldn’t be able to stay on top of the kid’s schedules, and that everything
would devolve into total and utter chaos by the end of the first week.

“Stop looking at me like that.”

“Like what?” I shrug innocently, unable to rein in my smile even a fraction.

“I don’t know. Just… like that.” He demands, pointing right at my face. “Make it stop.”

“Can’t. Sorry.”

“Fine.” Without warning, he practically pounces on me. I guess this is his way of attempting to wipe the look of pride off of my face. Or at least avoid having to see it anymore.

I’m not complaining.

Not until his eager kisses cause me to stumble backwards into the stack of dirty saucepans in the sink, sending a couple of the more precariously placed ones tumbling to the floor with a loud clatter that seems to echo throughout the quiet house. It was definitely loud enough that it could have woken one of the kids up, and we freeze mid-kiss as we strain to hear the sound of a bedroom door opening, or little feet making their way along the upstairs hallway towards the stairs.

But it must be our lucky night, because all we can hear is the relieved breaths we both exhale.

“Close one.” He grins wickedly before his lips claim mine once again.

And apparently he learned nothing from that close call, because his kisses are no less intense and demanding than they were a few seconds ago. Which I guess means that I’m going to have to be twice as assertive as he’s being if I want to avoid being manhandled into another stack of dirty dishes. Or a freshly made lasagna.

He gasps in surprise when I grab him by the wrists, prying his hands away from their possessive grip on my waist as he groans approvingly against my mouth and allows me to effortlessly back him out of the room. More than once it feels as though we’re going to trip each other up, our legs repeatedly becoming tangled, but it’s just an excuse to cling to each other even more tightly.
“Where are we going?” He asks me breathlessly when I make a somewhat coordinated attempt at maneuvering him around the dining table.

I don’t know. I hadn’t given it a whole lot of thought. I was just trying to get him away from the disaster area formerly known as the kitchen. I guess we could do it on the dining table. Wouldn’t be the first time. Or the couch in the family room. Or the floor pretty much anywhere …

“Movie room?”

He doesn’t verbally respond to my suggestion, but the eagerness of his kisses pretty much says it all.

It’s convenient, it’s comfortable, and most importantly, it’s sound proof.

If we were paying as much attention to where we’re going as we are to undoing each other’s belts and pants without breaking our embrace for even a second, it would probably make the short journey to the movie room much easier. But because we’re so preoccupied, it takes twice as long as it should and involves a hell of a lot of bumping into walls. I find myself having to resist the urge to simply pick him up, carry him along the hall, and throw him down onto one of those recliners! I somehow manage to restrain myself, but only barely, and mostly because I hear the sound of him turning the doorknob just as I’m about to lose all patience.

As soon as the door is closed behind us, he has me turned around so quickly that it really does make me a little dizzy for a moment. Next thing I know, the back of my legs bump up against the arm of the nearest recliner, and with one tiny push from him, I’m falling backwards onto it. He looks so damn pleased with himself as he grabs the legs of my jeans and gives a couple of rough tugs to remove them, and while he’s quickly discarding his own clothes, I lie back and appreciate the view.

Because I have never not appreciated this view.

Before tossing his pants aside, he reaches into his pocket and pulls out his wallet, producing a packet of lube that he unceremoniously throws at my face before going back to getting naked. Some guys carry condoms in their wallets, but when I moved out here three years ago, we decided to make sure we had lube on hand (so to speak) at all times, just in case. We were in that ‘honeymoon phase’ where we couldn’t keep our hands off of each other, and couldn’t be trusted not to have sex whenever and wherever the opportunity presented itself. So it seemed like a smart idea to always be prepared.
Only it turned out to be less of a phase and more of a constant.

“You gonna lie there and stare at the lube all night, or do something useful with it?” He taunts me cheekily, pushing my legs off of the arm of the recliner so that I’m actually sitting in it instead of lying across it.

Before I have chance to think of an equally sassy retort, he’s on his knees in front of me, and my mouth is a little busy falling open in anticipation as I watch his mouth descend hungrily on my erection. My eyes immediately slam shut, and my hands instinctively grasp at the armrests, and then at his hair, anything I can hold onto in order to resist the urge to buck my hips. But when I open my eyes just in time to see those incredible lips of his sliding lazily down the length of me, it’s nearly impossible to control myself. I squirm beneath his touch, until his hands clamp down forcefully on my hips to hold me still, right where he wants me.

I kinda love it when he’s all business.

I could easily lose myself in what he’s doing to me right now, even though I know this isn’t all either of us had in mind when we came in here. But he’s so damn good at it, it’s not like he could really hold it against me! Not if he’s planning to keep up this frantic pace he’s set. I try to warn him that I can’t be held responsible for letting go if he doesn’t stop soon, but he doesn’t so much as pause for a second to consider what I’ve said.

And then just when I’m gasping for breath, repeatedly telling him that I’m about to come, he stops. I swear, I’m so fucking close that a gentle breeze would probably get me off right now. It’s almost cruel. Almost. That’s another thing he’s good at; pushing me to the limit and then pulling me back just before I reach it. It leaves my head spinning, it’s entirely disorienting.

I hope he never stops doing it.

It takes me a few seconds to recover and catch up as he climbs onto my lap, his lips seeking mine as he writhes against me. But as soon as I’m capable of thinking even slightly clearly, I’m pulling him nearer than he already is, tangling my fingers in his hair and deepening the kiss. He moans breathlessly into my mouth, it’s an almost helpless sound despite the fact that he’s anything but helpless right now. Every time he moves, he grinds his hips against mine, but I can feel how badly he needs something else. Something more. Every breath, every sound that passes his lips is more desperate and pleading than the last.
Grabbing a fistful of his hair, I pull his head back just enough to expose more of his throat to me. He makes a noise, something between surprise and satisfaction, and I can practically hear the smug smile spreading across his face when he exhales against my ear. My teeth nip playfully at the side of his neck, and it feels as though his whole body shudders in my arms. The next nip is less of a nip and more of a bite, and his reaction is more intense as a result.

“Fuck … where the hell is it?” He gasps, unwilling to pull away from me for even a second to find what he’s looking for.

“That’s not really a question a guy wants to be asked during sex. Just… FYI.”

He shoves me playfully in the chest, pushing me away so that I can see the disapproving scowl on his face (and the amusement in his eyes). And then he almost immediately pulls me closer again. I let go of him just long enough to reach into the cup holder of the armrest beside me and retrieve the packet of lube.

“This what you’re looking for?”

He snatches it out of my hand without a word, tearing it open with his teeth and holding my stare as he empties the contents into his palm. When his fingers close around me, it feels so fucking good that I barely even notice that the recliner is… well… reclining. The movement stops as soon as he has the chair, and me, exactly where he wants, and my hands settle on his thighs to steady him (and myself) as he lowers himself onto me. And I fight the same battle I have to fight every time we do this; I have to resist that instinct to close my eyes when that initial wave of pleasure hits me. I have to resist it so that I can see the look on his face, so that I can watch his eyes close and his teeth sink into his lower lip. His brow furrows, just for a second, and then an expression of absolute peace takes over.

He always looks beautiful to me, but in that moment… there’s no word to describe just how beautiful he is.

“What?” He frowns at me when his eyes eventually open again. “Stop looking at me like that.”

“Can’t. Sorry.”

His eyes narrow scathingly, but there’s a smirk fighting its way onto his lips. “Fine.”
Whatever it is he does to me next robs me of any ability I had to control anything my body does, let alone whether I look at him a certain way or not. Clearly that was why he did it, and why he does it again and again, until it leaves him breathless and weak enough that I can grab him and pull him into a kiss. It’s enough to slow him down a little, to slow everything down, so that we can focus on how we’re making each other feel rather than trying to remember how to breathe.

It’s crazy how it can feel like we haven’t had sex in weeks when really it has only been a matter of days. But sometimes forty-eight hours is long enough for me to miss him. It’s more than long enough for me to crave him. Until I met him, I never knew that it was possible to crave another person. Sex? Sure. A lot of people crave that if they go without it for long enough. I’ve felt that need to get off before, to feel that release. But it was always only about what my body physically needed. It was never about wanting, needing, to be with a specific person.

Not until him.

Because that need I feel for him, the one that makes me miss him and crave him, isn’t physical. It’s entirely emotional.

We once tried to describe the way we feel when we’re apart, and the only word we could come up with for it was ‘ache’. But we’ve never really tried to define the way we feel when we’re together like this. I’ve never even asked him if he feels what I feel, but it’s not because I can’t put it into words, or because I think he’ll call me an idiot. It’s because I already know that he feels it. Like right now, in this moment, looking into his eyes, I can see it. No one has ever looked at me the way he does, and I believe one hundred percent that it’s because no one else has ever felt the way he feels about me. No one else could.

And no one else could ever make me feel the way I do about him.

I watch in open-mouthed awe as he pushes himself up, his hands against my chest for support, and throws his head back. It’s not like it’s something I’ve never seen him do before, but that doesn’t make it any less breathtaking, or make me feel any less amazed by the fact that he even exists. Don’t get me started on how much it blows my mind that he exists, and that I get to spend the rest of my life looking into those eyes when they’re so dark with desire, or hearing those quiver inducing sounds coming out of his mouth.

And I can tell from those sounds he’s making that he’s close. There’s desperation in them, pleading. He takes his erection in his right hand, while the fingers of his left hand grasp at my chest so carelessly that I wouldn’t be surprised to find little, red nail indentations when we’re done here. But it doesn’t hurt, if anything it’s such a turn on that it probably could’ve pushed me closer to the edge just as quickly as the erratic rhythm of his hips has.
As much as I try to hold back until he comes, tonight is one of those nights where it’s just not going to happen. I doubt he minds, though. In fact, when I can finally open my eyes and focus my vision on his face, I see him gazing down at me with what can only be described as a look of total fulfillment.

I’m pretty sure I have a very similar expression on my face as I watch him let go, too.

His body collapses over mine as he exhales breathless bursts of soft laughter, and I can’t help but smile at the sound of it. I kiss his shoulder tenderly as my hands soothingly stroke his back, until eventually he has the strength to prop himself up and meet my eyes.

“I didn’t even realize just how much I fucking needed that.”

“Me either.” I chuckle quietly. “Not that I ever *don’t* need it at least a little. But… yeah. That was necessary.”

“It was the longest I’ve gone without thinking about anything depressing or shitty or stressful all day.” He tells me gratefully, leaning down to capture my lips with his. “So… thank you.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

When he starts to shift off of me, I whine in protest. But he simply rolls his eyes at how pathetic I’m being and continues his slightly unsteady climb off of the recliner. He grabs one of the blankets nearby and wraps it around his waist like a towel before making his way back to the door. And I don’t have the strength left to do anything but crane my neck to watch him walk away.

“Where are you going?”

“I’ll be back.” He assures me. “Cover your junk and try to stay out of trouble.”
I sigh contentedly, pressing the button to put the recliner back up as I reach over and pick up one of the blankets on the chair beside mine. As I go to drape it across my legs, the brightly colored cartoon characters printed on it stare cheerfully back up at me. It makes me feel creepy to be covering my sweaty, naked body with Viggo’s ‘Cars’ blanket, so I make the extra effort to reach even further and find the blanket Tommy usually uses instead.

It seems like it takes forever for him to return. So long that I find myself starting to drift off to sleep. And when he finally does come back, he’s fully clothed and his arms are full. Most of what he’s carrying isn’t too surprising; some Kleenex, sweatpants and a t-shirt for me, and a couple of bottles of water. It’s the lasagna that leaves me speechless.

“What?” He shrugs one shoulder dismissively at my questioning stare. “I’m hungry.”

“It’s two o’clock in the morning.”

“That doesn’t make me any less hungry.”

“That lasagna is supposed to feed six people at some point next week!” I remind him, trying (and failing) to hide my amusement.

“Not anymore it’s not.”

He dumps the tissues, sweats and t-shirt into my lap before making himself comfortable in the next recliner over, setting the dish of lasagna on the armrests between us. I could protest some more, but I already know it’s pointless. He’s going to eat it no matter what I say.

Besides… I’m hungry, too.

So instead of trying to talk him out taking his fork and digging into the middle of the lasagna, I clean myself up, pull my sweatpants on, pick up my own fork, and join him.
Despite our exhausting late night (or early morning, to be more accurate) sexcapades in the movie room, neither Tommy or I could sleep. We didn’t even discuss or debate the fact that we were going to spend the rest of the night watching DVDs, it was like some unspoken decision we made. Lying in recliners and watching John Wayne movies was definitely preferable to lying in bed and watching shadows on the ceiling. Not that the movies were able to keep my mind entirely pre-occupied, but they did a hell of a better job of it than the light fixture above our bed would have.

I can’t figure out how I’m feeling today. The weird flip-flopping thing that my stomach is doing could be a result of excitement or anxiety. I’m sure there’s plenty of both raging through my body right now, but I wish I knew which one was to blame for me being too nauseous to eat breakfast.

I made bacon.

I love bacon.

I’m just afraid that if I eat bacon right now, I’m gonna have to pull over halfway to the kid’s school to throw it up. And judging by the way Tommy has spent the last fifteen minutes poking his scrambled eggs with a fork, but never actually taking a single bite, I’d say he’s feeling something very similar.

“Daddy, can I have your bacon?” Asta asks me sweetly, gazing longingly at my plate.
At the mere suggestion that my food might be up for grabs, Viggo and River instantly perk up and start paying attention. “Sure.”

“Can I have your eggs?” Viggo requests before River can beat him to it.

“Help yourself.” I sigh wearily, pushing my plate into the middle of the table so that he can reach it.

But that apparently makes everything on it fair game to the rest of my kids, and all I can do is sit back and watch as the vultures pick it clean. I guess it doesn’t really matter; I wasn’t going to eat it anyway. And only a few seconds later, Tommy wordlessly pushes his plate into the fray, and his food disappears from it so quickly that it’s almost like some kind of magic trick.

At least we know the kids won’t be going to school hungry.

“How come you’re not eating anything?” Frowns Penny in concern, even as she spreads grape jelly on what was, once upon a time, my toast. “Are you sick?”

“Uh…”

“We couldn’t sleep last night, so we watched movies and had a midnight snack.” Tommy tells her, and I’m impressed that he managed to tell her the truth without making it sounds as odd as I probably would have. “We ate too much, and now we’re too stuffed for breakfast.”

“How come I’m not allowed to watch movies all night and eat snacks?” Asks River indignantly.

“Lots of reasons.” I tell him with a small smile, staring into my coffee cup and wondering if drinking it will make me feel as sick as eating bacon would have. “Mostly because you’re only nine, and you have to get up early for school, and-”

“But you have to get up early to take us to school.” Penny points out. “Aren’t you tired?”

“Nah.” Tommy shrugs, standing from the table and picking up the empty pitcher of orange juice
beside him. “Adults don’t get tired.”

“Then why do you sleep most nights?” Challenges Viggo shrewdly.

“Because…” He pauses, and I have to bite back a chuckle as I watch him trying to come up with an answer that might satisfy our overly-curious children. “We’ve been brainwashed into sleeping.”

“By who?”

“Society.”

Glancing around the table, it appears that everyone has a different reaction to that statement. Asta just plain doesn’t care, she probably wasn’t even paying attention to the conversation because she had bacon to eat (she is so my kid). Viggo looks thoroughly confused, River seems more than a little skeptical, and Penny is rolling her eyes and shaking her head the way she always does when one of us says something she deems stupid. Ezra is the only one who seems to have found it as funny as I did.

Once breakfast is over, the usual morning chaos begins. I call it chaos, because I know that’s what it is, but to us it’s really just routine now. It doesn’t feel chaotic, even though I’m sure anyone watching it unfold would think that Tommy and I are completely outnumbered and out of our depth. Who knows, maybe we are and we’re just too crazy to realize it.

It would explain a lot.

Before we hustle the kids out of the house and into the cars, I grab myself a travel mug full of coffee to get me through the morning commute. It’s my fifth cup of the day so far, and I’m pretty sure it’s not going to be my last. I can’t even remember the last time I pulled an allnighter of any kind, and I’m starting to think I’m getting too old for that kind of thing. Thank god for coffee, because otherwise I don’t know how I’d get through all of the sleepless nights that come with having a newborn at home.

Just like almost every other morning, Tommy takes Asta to pre-school while I run the rest of the kids over to their school. But unlike every other morning, we’re running a little late, which means I don’t have time to find a parking spot so that I can get out of the car and walk them over to the main building. When I pull up at the curb in the drop off lane, Viggo, River and Penny grab their backpacks, kiss me goodbye, and hurry off to find their friends. But Ezra stays in his seat until
they’re gone, until I turn as much as far as I can towards the passenger seat so that he’ll know he has my full attention.

“What’s wrong?” I ask worriedly. “Did you forget something at home?”

“No, it’s not that. I just didn’t want to ask about why you and Tommy didn’t eat breakfast ‘til they were all gone.”

Busted. “Tommy already said-”

“I know what he said. But even if he really was too full to eat, you never are.”

It’s true, but that doesn’t stop me from gaping at him indignantly. “Hey!”

“It’s true.” He smirks. “You always eat more than the rest of us.”

“Well that’s because I’m… taller. I have to eat more, because there’s more of me.”

“That makes as much sense as Tommy’s whole ‘society makes me sleep’ thing.” He points out. “And you still didn’t tell me why you didn’t want to eat breakfast.” Damn. Why did I get the smart, observant, empathetic kid? “Is something wrong with Dia? Is she not getting better?”

“No, no. It’s not Dia. She’s doing okay… it’s hard, but she’s pushing through.”

“So why were you and Tommy acting so weird at breakfast this morning?”

I know Tommy and I decided not to tell the kids about Shauntae being pregnant (if she even is) until after we’re a little further along and feeling a little more confident in things going smoothly. But I don’t see it being any easier to keep Ezra out of the loop until then than it has been already. He sees things, things his brothers and sisters don’t notice or even think to look for.

“We’re just a little nervous, that’s all. Shauntae is going to take a pregnancy test today.” I tell him, smiling faintly when his eyebrows jump in surprise. “There’s a chance it’ll be negative, and even if
it’s not, and she is pregnant… things happen. Especially early on. So it doesn’t mean we’re definitely having a baby. But…”

“That’s a big deal.” He nods in understanding. “Are you gonna tell us all tonight if she’s pregnant?”

“We want to make sure everything is going well before we tell your brothers and sisters. We don’t want to get their hopes up in case things don’t work out, so we’re gonna try to wait a while.”

“Well… will you tell me tonight?”

It’s not like I can say no. He knows about the test now, so it’s hardly fair to keep him in the dark about the results. “If you think you can keep it to yourself until we’re ready to tell everyone else?”

“I can.” He assures me confidently. “I won’t tell anyone, I promise.”

“Pinky swear?” I challenge semi-seriously, holding up my hand with my little finger extended towards him.

I’m expecting him to roll his eyes and shove my hand away before getting out of the car, so it leaves me momentarily speechless when he links his pinky with mine, the way he used to when he was Viggo’s age. “Pinky swear.”

He picks up his backpack and starts to open the passenger side door, pausing just long enough to wish me good luck. And all I can do as he steps out onto the sidewalk is stammer something that almost resembles “thanks”. It takes being honked at by the impatient parent in the car behind mine before I snap out of it.

I’m halfway home when I get a text from Shauntae to let me know that she’s on her way over to the house, which means she’ll likely get there just after I do. That’s a good thing, because the less time Tommy and I have to feed our anxiety over this pregnancy test, the better. I’m honestly not even sure what I’m more anxious about: what the result will be, or how Tommy is going to feel if it’s not the result we want. Obviously I’m going to be disappointed, too. But he’s taken every set back in the process so hard, and now that his mom’s sick… it’d be like the universe kicking him when he’s down.

And judging by the number of times it’s done that in the past, it derives a twisted amount of pleasure
It makes me wish I could kick the universe right back.

When I get home, Tommy is sitting on one of the bottoms steps of the stairs. Whether he was waiting for me or Shauntae, I don’t know.

“Sorry I took so long.” I apologize as soon as he looks up from the step his feet are resting on. “You okay?”

“We should’ve talked about how this is gonna work.”

“How what is going to work?” I frown, taking a seat beside him.

“Well, like… when she gets here, are we supposed to like… hang out and chat until she’s ready to pee?” He asks so seriously that I can’t decide whether to laugh out loud or hug him. “I don’t want it to be like, ‘Hey, how’s it going? The bathroom’s over there’, you know? And should we offer her something to drink, or do you think she’s gonna feel like we’re just hydrating her so she’ll pee sooner?”

“Baby, I think you’re over-thinking this. Which is my job, so you should let me do it.” I wrap my arm comfortingly around his shoulders as he takes a deep breath in an effort to calm his nerves. “How about we just… see how it goes?”

“Why are you so fucking calm all of a sudden?”

I’m not, I’m freaking out. But so is he, and that makes it easier for me to ignore all of the insane thoughts careening through my head right now and focus on helping him to deal with his. It always does. He’s done the same for me countless times since the day we met, but lately he’s had ten times as many of those insane thoughts to deal with. I know it frustrates him, and it makes him feel weak to be so anxious so much of the time. I don’t see it that way, though. In my eyes, he’s still the strongest person I’ve ever met. And he’s helped me become the strongest version of myself I’ve ever been. Strong enough to hold things together for the both of us when he needs me to.

I don’t have a chance to tell him all of that (and he probably wouldn’t have listened to me anyway), because the doorbell interrupts my conversation.
“This is it.” I tell him, trying to inject as much positivity and hope into my tone as possible.

He nods and takes the hand I offer him when I stand from my seat on the step, and he doesn’t let go of it until we’re standing at the door. I take a deep breath and open it to find Shauntae standing outside with a small cardboard box in her hands.

“Hey.” She greets us, her voice wavering very slightly with what I assume is a similar version of the same nerves we’re suffering from. “Am I late?”

“Nope, right on time.” I assure her as I step aside to let her into the house. “You didn’t bring us another amazing dessert, did you?”

Her brow furrows in confusion. “Huh?”

“The box.” I elaborate, nodding at her hands.

“Oh, no. There’s definitely nothing edible in here.”

“Then what is in there?” Asks Tommy curiously.

“Uh… well, to put it bluntly… pee.”

“Pee?” I laugh softly, uncertainly. “As in…”

“Yup.”

“You have a box full of pee?” Tommy snorts incredulously.

“Not full of pee. And the pee is actually in one of those plastic sample cups, but I didn’t want to drive Stella to school with a sample cup full of pee sitting on the seat beside me, or like… in the cup holder. So I put it in a box.”
For a moment, neither of us can think of anything to say in response to her rambling explanation. So we just stand there and stare at her, and she stares right back like everything she just said is totally normal.

“She’s officially the female version of you.” Tommy declares, casting a sassy smirk my way as Shauntae chuckles quietly.

“I take that as a compliment.” I tell him before turning back to Shauntae. “But... why’d you bring a cup of pee with you?”

“I knew I wasn’t going to be able to get through the whole morning without going to the bathroom, and I heard that it’s best to do a pregnancy test first thing in the morning, because your pee is more concentrated. The results are more accurate that way.”

“This is the most I’ve heard the word ‘pee’ in the space of five minutes since Asta was potty training.” Tommy muses.

“Anyway, I figured that if I couldn’t hold it until I got here, I’d just have to bring it with me, so…” She reaches into the box and pulls out the sample cup, and I can’t help but laugh when Tommy instinctively flinches away from it. “Ta-da.”

“Um…” There has to be something appropriate to say here. I’m just… not sure what it is. “Thank you for your… diligence.”

“What he said. But I’m not touching that.”

She rolls her eyes in amusement at the look of disgust on Tommy’s face. “You don’t have to. I’ll do the test and then you guys can do the big reveal.”

“Okay.”

“I left the tests on the vanity in the bathroom.” I explain as I lead her across the foyer towards the hallway. “I kinda got one of every brand they had at Walgreens, but you don’t have to use them all-”
“May as well.” She shrugs unconcernedly. “I mean, the more results, and the more sources, the better. Right?”

I sure as hell hope so.

It only takes Shauntae a couple of minutes to take all of the tests, even though she’s not taking them in the way most people would assume. But those couple of minutes still feel twice as long. And then when she brings the tests with her into the family room and lays them face down on the coffee table, the real waiting begins. Two of the tests are supposed to have results within two minutes, while the other two need to be left for three minutes. So, as tempting as it is to look at the first two as soon as they’re ready, we agree to wait (and squirm) until all four results are in.

When the alarm on my iPhone goes off to signal the end of what felt like an endless wait, none of us moves. After all of that effort we put into resisting the urge to reach out and turn one of the tests over, suddenly it seems as though neither of us wants to do it. We’ve been eagerly (and anxiously) anticipating this moment for weeks, months, and now it’s finally here.

And it’s fucking terrifying.

“You do it.” Tommy tells me, his voice as unsteady as my hand as I reach out and pick up the test that’s closest to me.

But I can’t turn it over.

And just as I start to work up the courage to make that one, tiny move, I stop myself and hold it out to him instead. “You should do it.”

“Wuss!” He scowls, even as he himself leans away from the small plastic test like it’s a sample cup full of pee. “Why do I have to do it?”

“You don’t have to do it.” I smile fondly. “I think you should get to do it. You wanted to do it all, remember?”

He stares at me for a moment, and then at the test. And after taking a very deep breath, he gingerly
accepts the small, seemingly innocuous piece of plastic from me. It’s like he’s afraid it’s some kind of bomb that’s going to blow up in his face if he’s not careful. I guess, in a way, it kind of is.

And there’s nothing he or I can do or say at this point that will alter the results on that little screen when he turns it over.

“Count of three?” I suggest, smiling faintly at the memory of us sitting on this very sofa earlier this year, using this same method to reveal our choice of egg donor. It seems like forever ago already.

“Okay.”

“One…”

“Two…” Adds Shauntae eagerly, her hands clasped together so tightly that her knuckles are white.

“Three.” Tommy concludes, hesitating for a fraction of a second longer before turning the test over. “Two lines... there’re two lines, right?”

“There are two lines.” I confirm as an ecstatic grin spread across my face.

Shauntae grabs the box for the First Response test he’s holding, even though we know that two lines is a positive result. But somehow seeing that picture on the back of the box and holding it side by side with the test seems to make it even more real for all of us. Suddenly each of the three of us reaches out and snatches one of the remaining tests off of the table, turning them over in such synchronicity that it probably would have looked rehearsed if anyone had been watching.

“Pregnant!” Shauntae announces excitedly, holding up the Clear Blue digital test.

“We have another winner.” I nod, passing the e.p.t test to Tommy so that he can see the plus sign in the window. “How about yours?”

“Nothing.” He frowns, passing the Walgreens test to me as he looks at Shauntae. “Are you sure you used that one?”
“I’m sure! Maybe it’s a dud?”

“Probably.” I agree as I place the test on the table. “I knew I should’ve avoided the cheapo store brand test.”

“But nothing isn’t the same thing as negative.” She points out, very obviously directing her enthusiasm at Tommy because of the conflicted expression on his face. “And even if it was, the other three were very definitely positives. Those lines weren’t faint ‘maybe’ lines, they were clear lines.”

He nods slowly, his eyes still trained on that stupid dud test. “Yeah.”

“We’re having a baby.” I tell him confidently. “Not someday, hopefully. We’re actually having a baby. Like… nine months from now.”

“Oh my god…” Gasps Shauntae, suddenly sitting back in her seat as though someone just made a shocking announcement. “I’m pregnant.”

“You just realized that?”

“Apparently.”

“Congratulations.” I laugh softly, turning my attention back to Tommy. But his attention is still entirely focused on the four tests sitting on the table in front of us. “Tommy?”

“Hmm?”

“What’s wrong?”

The smile on his face is clearly for my benefit, it’s not an honest representation of how he’s actually feeling right now. “Nothing.”
“Are you worried because that one test didn’t work?” Asks Shauntae knowingly. “I was the same when I got pregnant with Stella. I took all three tests in the box, and even then I could barely let myself believe it.”

“What did it take for you to get past it?”

“I made Sam go to the store and buy me six more tests from two other brands. When they all came out positive, my brain finally stopped questioning it.” She smirks. “Would it help if I went and took the rest of the tests? There’s plenty of pee left, it’s not a problem.”

This time when he smiles it looks much more genuine. “Please?”

She nods obligingly before hurrying out of the room, and as soon as we’re alone my first instinct is to start trying to convince him that it’s okay to let his guard down and be happy about this. But as soon as I open my mouth to speak, I realize that nothing I could say to him right now is going to make him believe that this is real. After the year he’s had so far, this probably feels too easy. He was prepared to be disappointed, but he never prepared himself for the opposite. So instead of trying to talk to him, I simply hold his hand, and I can tell from how immediately he clasps my hand in response that it was exactly what he needed. I can only hope that the rest of the tests are positive, and then maybe, maybe he’ll be able to accept this and be as excited as I am.

This time when the alarm goes off to let us know the test results are ready, there’s no hesitation or debating who should look first. All three of us flip over the tests nearest us, until all six of them are face up, and then no one speaks as we scan the table, taking in each result one by one.

“Positive.” I summarize with a relieved exhale. “They’re all positive, even those last two crappy Walgreens ones!”

I turn to Tommy, expecting to see an excited look on his face that mirrors the one on mine, but all I see is the same blank stare he’s been wearing for the past ten minutes. In an effort to try to snap him out of it, I cup his face gently in my hand and redirect his gaze to me instead.

“Hey?”

“Yeah?” He asks, blinking at me somewhat dazedly.
“We’re having a baby.”

“We’re having a baby.” He parrots, his eyes slowly widening as those words finally, truly sink in for him. “Holy fucking shit… we’re having a baby? !”

“That’s the rumor.”

He turns in his seat to look at Shauntae, and she seems to find the stunned expression he’s wearing as funny as I do. “You’re pregnant?”

“Apparently!” She chuckles before he practically knocks the air out of her with the force of the hug he wraps her in.

“Thank you.”

“You’re so completely welcome. Thank you guys for asking me to do this with you.”

“You’re not gonna be saying that in about nine months from now when my demon spawn is clawing its way out of you.” He warns her playfully.

“Well, maybe I won’t be saying it at that exact moment. But I’ll still be feeling it. Deep… deep down.”

“I can’t believe this is happening.” He murmurs, mostly to himself, shaking his head in disbelief.

“Me either.” I agree wholeheartedly.

“Pinch me.”

“While we have company?”
I try to dodge the slap I knew that comment was going to earn me, but somehow I’m not fast enough to escape it completely. And there’s no getting away from his playful death glare, so I guess I’m just going to have to get rid of it instead.

When my lips meet his, I can already feel that they’re smiling, and it instantly brings a smile to my face, too.

How can I not smile?

We’re having a baby.
When it comes to packing, I know every trick in the book to cram as much as possible into any size bag you can throw at me. Mary Poppins ain’t got nothin’ on me; I could totally fit a floor lamp in a duffle bag if the situation called for it. If there is such a thing as a professional packer, people would very likely pay me to pack for them. I’m that good at it.

Too bad I hate packing.

It’s stupid, because it takes me no time at all. I could probably do it in my sleep, it’s that simple for me, I barely need to think about it. And yet, I always procrastinate doing it until the last minute. Even Tommy is better about getting his packing done in a timely manner, and he hates doing it more than I do! I’m even worse about it when it’s a trip he won’t be accompanying me on. I guess it’s my way of protesting the fact that I have to leave him. I’m defiantly refusing to pack my bags in the hopes that if I’m not ready to go when the time comes, I won’t have to go at all.

It never works.

It just results in me needing to do a load of laundry at eleven o’clock the night before I’m due to depart. Because when I finally start to pack my bags like a big boy, I realize half of the stuff I want to take with me is in the dirty clothes hamper in our closet. Normally a load of laundry would take me less than two hours to wash, dry, and fold. But last night Tommy offered to “help” me. And his idea of helping involved us having sex on the laundry room floor. On top of a pile of my freshly cleaned clothes. Which meant I had to wash most of them again.
Worth it.

I totally should’ve seen it coming. Whenever I go out of town without him for more than a couple of nights, he tends to spend the days leading up to my departure jumping on me at every available opportunity. It’s like he thinks he’s never going to see me again or something, so he’s trying to cram in as much sex as possible before I’m gone for good. It’s the only part of this whole leaving process that I actually look forward to. And the fact that it seems to make him feel better about it is even more of a reason for me to let our food burn when he decides that he *needs* to go down on me in the middle of the kitchen while I’m making lunch.

But the amount of sex we have isn’t the only thing that increases as we countdown to the moment we’ll have to say goodbye. We’re always physically affectionate with each other, but the amount of time we spend hugging or holding hands, or even just standing as close to one another as possible skyrocket.

My kids get clingier with me, too. They all went through stages of it when they were little, like most kids, but now Asta is really the only one of them who still behaves that way with either of us (and Tommy is usually the one she clings to). It’s kinda nice to have them bickering over who gets to sit next to me, or asking me to spend time helping them to do something that they usually wouldn’t want my help with.

At the end of the day, though, having all of that extra affection and attention coming at me from every direction only makes it harder to let them all go. Even when I know it won’t be long until I see them again. The next couple of weeks are going to be especially tough, because it’s the longest consecutive period of time I’ve spend away from the kids since they lost their mom. They’ve known it was coming for months, we made sure to tell them as early as possible so that it wouldn’t feel sudden in any way. But now that it’s here, I’m not sure any of that preparation is going to make much of a difference.

And as if all of that wasn’t enough to deal with, we’re also supposed to be getting a call from the doctor tomorrow to let us know the results of Shauntae’s first blood test. After ten positive pregnancy tests, we should be feeling confident to the point of being cocky. But for some strange reason, we’re not. Getting these results is almost as nerve-wracking as getting the results of that first batch of pregnancy tests.

I just hope we get the call *before* Tommy drops me off at LAX.

I also hope I can sleep on my flight to Tulsa, because I barely got any sleep last night. It was already going to be a long day, but lack of sleep is guaranteed to make it feel even longer.
With a grudging sigh, I give up on the slim hope I had of slipping into unconsciousness for another five minutes, and I force myself to open my eyes. The room isn’t dark, but I can tell that it isn’t light outside yet, either. It’s early, which just makes the fact that I can’t get back to sleep twice as unfair as it already was! Tommy is still sleeping peacefully beside me, curled up under the comforter so snugly that all I can really see of him is his hair. I carefully peel the sheets down, just enough so that I can see his face. I don’t want to wake him; he needs the sleep more than I do. All I want to do is look at him (and I don’t care how creepy he, or anyone else, would accuse me of being for doing it).

This is the last time I get to wake up beside him for the next fourteen days, so I’m going to make the most of every last second.

I know it’s stupid. Two weeks is nothing. We made it through three weeks apart earlier this summer, and we could deal with being apart for longer if we had to. We can deal with anything. I just… hate it. I hate being without him. I spent most of my life without him, knowing that I was missing something and resigned to the fact that I’d probably never know what it was, let alone be lucky enough to have it. And now that he’s here, now that I finally have him, I don’t want to be away from him. Because despite the fact that I know I’ll see him soon, that everything will be back to normal in only a couple of months, missing him just reminds me of how I felt before I met him. That empty space inside me never feels quite as painful as it used to, because I still get to talk to him every day, I know he’s still there.

But not being able to be with him this way, having to let him go even for just a little while… it’s like an old wound reopening.

It stings.

I’m not sure how long I spend staring at him. I’m vaguely aware of the light changing in the room around us, too quickly for my liking, but my alarm hasn’t gone off yet, so I know it’s not that late. But apparently it’s late enough for Asta to have woken up on her own. The stillness and silence of our bedroom is broken as soon as she opens the door. She doesn’t announce her presence, but I can hear her footsteps as she charges towards the bed, and the soft grunting noise she makes from the effort of hoisting herself up onto the mattress with us. Before she has the chance to jump on either one of us, I sit up and grab her. The commotion is enough to cause Tommy to stir, but only enough to roll over in an attempt to escape it.

“Don’t wake him up.” I tell her in a whisper. “He’s sleepy.”

“I can’t sleep anymore.”
“Me either.”

“How come?”

“I don’t know. How come you can’t sleep anymore?”

After seriously considering the question for a moment, she simply shrugs. “I sleeped too much, I think.”

“Lucky you.”

“Daddy?”

“Yes?”

“Can I have pancakes for my breakfast?” She asks in her sweetest little voice.

Not that she needs to play at being a little angel to get her way this morning. Making her pancakes is the least I can do before I leave. “What kind?”

“Umm…. blueberry.”

“You got it, dude.” I smile as I peck her on the cheek and lift her down off of the bed. “I’ll meet you downstairs in a minute, okay?”

“Kay!” She grins excitedly before hurrying back out into the hallway.

Casting one last look at Tommy’s back, I can’t resist the urge to lean across the bed and plant a feather light kiss against his shoulder blade. And when he breathe a soft sound of contentment, there’s no way I can stop myself from doing it again. But that’s all I allow myself to do, because I know that if I wake him up any more than I already have, he’s not going to let me get out of this bed.
Not that I would mind at all, but Asta probably won’t be too pleased if I make her wait much longer for her pancakes.

After grabbing myself a pair of sweats and a t-shirt from the dresser, I make my way through the house. It’s unusually quiet, for a few more minutes at least. I’m sure once I start cooking, and the smell of freshly made pancakes starts creeping its way upstairs, Asta’s not going to be the only hungry child wanting to be fed.

Tommy and I agreed to keep things as close to normal as possible for them today. I didn’t want them taking the morning off of school to come and say goodbye to me at the airport. Mostly because I didn’t want to leave Tommy to deal with a bunch of mopey kids trying to pout their way to an entire day off of school. But also because there’s no point, and all it will do is make them more emotional than they will be if I say my goodbyes to them when I drop them off at school, like it’s any other day. And having school and their friends right there to immediately take their minds off of things is better than them having to watch me walk away from them at an airport security checkpoint.

Breakfast is a little more subdued than usual. Everyone’s a little less talkative, and it’s especially noticeable with River and Viggo. They typically chatter away through every meal; Viggo still has trouble remembering that he needs to finish chewing and swallow his food before opening his mouth to speak. Tommy doesn’t have to tell him not to do it even once this morning, which could potentially make this the first meal our family has ever had where Viggo hasn’t been chastised for talking with his mouth full! It would be easier to appreciate it if I wasn’t aware of the reason for his less than talkative mood.

I don’t expect Ezra too show too much emotion over my departure. I know that he’s going to miss me, but he’s old enough now that it doesn’t have the same effect on him as it does on his younger siblings. Penny is sad that I’m leaving, but she knows that two weeks isn’t that long, even in her dramatic, pre-pre-teen mind. For River and Viggo, two weeks is forever. I told them to make the same countdown calendar they made a few months ago when Tommy went on tour, because I hoped that seeing how few boxes they would need to cross off before my return might help them realize it wasn’t as long as it seemed to them.

I’m not sure it helped much.

Asta’s not happy about that fact that I’m leaving, and I’m sure she’ll kick up a fuss when it comes time to say goodbye. But I would be shocked if it was on the same level as the freak out she had when Tommy went away. She loves us both, we’re both her dads, but Tommy is like... her security blanket. She needs to know where he is at all times when he’s not at home, and if you can’t tell her approximately when he’ll be back, it can get very ugly very quickly. I know it’s something she’ll grow out of, and it’s nothing like the level of separation anxiety Viggo used to experience whenever I had to leave him. Besides, I find it too cute to be concerned by it.
“You ready?” Tommy asks me quietly while we watch the kids stuffing school books into their backpacks.

“I guess.”

“At least you can kinda ease into it, you know? You say goodbye to Asta now, then the rest of them at school. When I left, I had to do it all in one fucking go.”

“True.” I smile sadly, grateful for his attempt to make this whole thing seem even a little less sucky. “Come on, we should get going or they’ll all be late.”

He gestures for me to go ahead as the kids traipse unenthusiastically into the foyer with their bags and lunch boxes in hand, and I take a deep breath before making my way over to Asta. I almost want to laugh at the way Tommy positions himself between her and the front door, like he’s ready to snatch her up and flee the house if she shows even a hint of throwing a fit. Again, I appreciate the effort he’s putting into trying to make this easier on me, but it’s nothing I haven’t dealt with before.

It’s just been a hell of a long time since I last went through this routine.

“Gimme a hug.” I tell Asta, crouching in front of her and opening my arms for her. She doesn’t hesitate to fling herself into them, holding onto me tightly as I plant a big kiss on her cheek. “Remember what we talked about?”

“No.”

Of course not. “I’m not gonna be here when you come home from school today. I have to go see Uncle Ike and Uncle Zac for a while so we can do some work. But I’ll be back really soon.”

She pulls away from me a little, looking up at me with big, hopeful brown eyes. “Tomorrow?”

“No, not tomorrow. You remember the calendar that your brothers made? The one on the fridge?”
“Yes.”

“Every box on there is a day, and that’s how many days until I’ll come home.” I explain gently, casting a glance at Tommy, who offers me a small smile of encouragement. “It might look like a lot, but it isn’t really. And it’ll go by really fast.”

“But I don’t want you to go for all those days.” She whimpers forlornly. “It’s too many.”

“I know. I don’t want to go for all those days, either. But I have to do my work.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s just what grown ups have to do sometimes.”

“But why?”

“Because…”

I’m not really sure how to explain this to a three-and-a-half year old. I never really had to explain it to Viggo, because by the time he was her age and aware enough of my absences to question them, I wasn’t even touring anymore. It’s been nearly six years since River was this age, and I’m totally out of practice!

“Do you remember when we went on a bus to all those shows last year, and dad played music for all those people?” Ezra suddenly pipes up. It surprises me so much that I almost forget that I’m still crouched down, and therefore when I turn around too quickly to look at him, I nearly end up on my ass.

“Yeah.” Asta frowns uncertainly.

“Remember how everyone was singing, and dancing, and smiling?”

“Yeah.”
“That’s his work. He plays music for people, and it makes them really happy. If he doesn’t do his work, all of those people will be really sad.”

“Oh...”

For a second when my eyes meet his, I swear I see his mother standing there. Those words are so familiar, but they aren’t the ones I always used to use to placate my kids before I left for another tour or whirlwind promo trip.

They were hers.

And those words always worked. Because our kids were so kind and compassionate that they were willing to say goodbye to me if it meant other people wouldn’t have to be sad, no matter how sad it might make them to let me go.

Asta heaves a deep, heavy-hearted sigh, turning her attention from her big brother to me. I’m not sure I’ve ever been as proud of her as I am in this moment. This is a bigger step for her than the first actual step she ever took. It’s something she might not have been capable of a month or two ago, but she’s growing up so fast. Every day...

I can see the courage and determination in her eyes, even as the tears gather. “Okay.”

“Oh?” I somehow manage to get out, the word catching in my throat and coming out broken.

“You gotta go do your work so people won’t be sad.”

“Yeah, I do.”

“But I’ll miss you, daddy.”

“I’m gonna miss you, too.” I assure her, holding her to me tightly again as she sniffs softly against my shirt. “I’ll talk to you tonight before bed, okay? We’ll talk on the computer so we can see each
other.”

“Okay.”

Even Tommy seems glassy eyed when I look to him for assistance with letting go of my little girl. I notice him take a second to swallow the lump in his throat before he steps forwards and gently pries Asta’s arm from around my neck.

“We have to go, bug. It’s time for school.”

Unlike the ordeal a few months ago, when it took two people to pull her off of Tommy so that he could leave the house, it only takes her a few seconds to reluctantly release her grip on me and allow Tommy to lead her towards the door. He picks up her lunch box for her, because she’s far too busy staring back at me to do it herself. There are tears running down her cheeks, and I can’t tell if the hand that’s outstretched towards me is waving goodbye or trying to grab onto me again. And as if that wasn’t heartbreaking enough on its own, she says the words “bye daddy” over and over again, the sadness and distress in her voice increasing with every step she takes away from me. Until finally the door closes behind them and there’s nothing but quiet.

When I turn to look at my other children, I find them all staring solemnly at the ground. I can only guess how many memories the last few minutes has dredged up for them.

“Okay…” I begin, trying not to inject an insincere amount of enthusiasm into my tone. “Time for school, guys.”

“Do we have to?” Whines Viggo as I usher them out of the front door and over to the car. “Can’t we just stay home? Just for today?”

“You’re not sick.” Penny reminds him matter-of-factly. “You don’t need to stay home.”

“But I want to. I don’t wanna be at school all day and be sad.”

“You won’t be, buddy, I promise. As soon as you see your friends, you’ll be fine.” I assure him.
He doesn’t respond, and when I glance in the rearview mirror while they’re all putting on their seatbelts, I find him pouting and scowling at the back of the seat in front of him. It’s really hard to stop myself from giving in and telling them that they can all stay home from school today, eat nothing but ice cream, and watch movies non-stop until bedtime. But no matter how much I, or they, might believe it would make them feel better, I know it won’t.

Normally the car ride to school is a noisy one, with the kids talking to each other and to me, but today the only sound in the car comes from the radio, which I crank up louder than usual to make up for the lack of conversation. And to drown out the voice in my head that’s telling me how selfish I am for leaving them, and making me wonder if this will strain my relationship with Ezra all over again. I still don’t know for sure if me being away so much when he was younger caused him to doubt how much I loved him, or if those thoughts never crossed his mind until after Natalie died and he began to doubt *everything*.

I don’t ever want any of them to doubt how important they are to me, not for a second.

Just as I’d hoped, within minutes of me parking the car in the school lot and walking them over to the main building, River spots some of his friends and it pretty much turns his frown upside down. He hugs me tightly and makes me promise that he’ll get to talk to me before he goes to bed tonight, but after that he’s ready to say goodbye and get on with his day like it’s nothing out of the ordinary. Viggo takes a little more persuading. Or a lot more. I may have had to promise him that I’d bring him back one peanut butter cup from the chocolatier around the corner from our Tulsa studio for every day that I’m gone.

Whatever works, right?

Penny doesn’t want chocolate (but she’s getting some anyway). She doesn’t need coaxing or bribing to get her to go to class. She’s putting on the same brave face she always used to when I had to leave home for work. It’s something she learned from her mother. And while I appreciate the fact that she’s not bawling her eyes out and begging me to stay, I wish she didn’t feel like she had to hide her emotions to make *me* feel better.

Despite the tears from Asta, and the bargaining from Viggo, it’s much harder for me to say goodbye to Ezra than any of his younger siblings. It doesn’t matter how okay with all of this he appears to be, I’m still not convinced that he truly is.

“When do you have to be at the airport?” He asks, erasing the vision of his ten-year-old self that I’d apparently conjured in front of me.
It’s amazing how much he has grown up in the three short years since we moved out here.

“Tommy’s driving me there right after I get home from dropping you guys off. My flight leaves just before noon.”

“So you get to Tulsa at…” I watch as he tries to figure out the time difference in his head. I wasn’t even so adept at it when I was his age, but he has a lot more practice than I’d ever had when I was twelve. “Five?”

“Yeah, somewhere around then. It’ll be about the same time as you get out of school.”

“Is Tommy picking us up?”

“Yeah, he’ll be here.” I quickly confirm, wishing I hadn’t made it sound so much like I was trying to convince him or reassure him of something. He didn’t seem worried about whether or not Tommy would be here, so I had no reason to assuage that non-existent fear. “Listen, Ez-”

“Don’t worry.” He offers me a small smile as he shifts his backpack onto the opposite shoulder. “I’ll help out.”

“Help out?”

“With stuff at home, and with Viggo and Asta.”

“I know you will.” I tell him gratefully. “And I really appreciate that, and Tommy will, too. But no one expects you to, okay? It’s not your job to be me when I’m not around.”

“I know. But I always helped mom when you went away, so…”

“Yeah, and I’m really proud of you for that, and I’m proud of you for wanting to do it now. I just… I don’t want you to think things are gonna be like that again.”

“What do you mean?” He frowns uncertainly.
“I know that me being gone so much when you were younger made you feel like I didn’t care enough to stay—”

“Dad—”

“But it wasn’t true then, and it’s definitely not true now.” I promise him earnestly. “I wish your uncles and I could have gotten everything finished sooner somehow so that we could have done this tour while you guys were on summer break like we did before; I don’t want to leave you all here.”

“I know.”

“Really?”

He nods confidently, making it possible for me to breathe easy for the first time all day. “Really.”

As I pull him into a hug, the bell rings to signal that school has officially started. I instinctively hold on to him a little tighter, and for a moment it’s as though he’s the one leaving me and I’m the one having a hard time letting go.

“I’ll call you tonight, okay?”

“Okay.”

“I love you. You know that, right?”

I can’t tell if he pulls out of the hug or pushes me away gently, but either way he’s rolling his eyes at me when he does it.

I’d be worried if it weren’t for the smile on his face.

“I know.”
I’m forgetting something.

I don’t know what it is, so it’s probably not all that important. I have my phone and my wallet, so there’s really no forgotten item that cannot be replaced once I get to Tulsa. But those rational facts don’t seem to be enough to reassure me, no matter how many times I silently repeat them to myself.

Maybe it’s not an actual thing that I’m forgetting, maybe it’s something I was supposed to do but didn’t, or something I wanted to tell Tommy and haven’t…

“Did I feed the dog this morning?” I ask him worriedly as he navigates the car onto the freeway.

“No.” Damn. “I did. Like I do every morning.”

“Oh… right.”

“And before you ask, no you didn’t leave anything in the dryer, yes you locked the front door behind us, no you didn’t leave the oven on, and yes you remembered to get a lasagna out of the freezer so it’ll defrost in time for dinner.”
He knows me too well. Or maybe just well enough. “Remember to put some foil over it before you put it in the oven, otherwise the cheese on the top will burn.”

“Sure.”

“But take the foil off about fifteen minutes before it’s done.”

“Yes, sir.” He nods obediently.

“There should be enough for eight slices. I like to cut it in half down the middle, and then lengthwise, and then cut those four pieces in half.”

“And should I use some kind of utensil to serve it, or can I just like scoop it out with my hands?”

“Very funny.”

“You know you were gonna say something if I didn’t ask.” I would argue with him if it wasn’t for the fact that he’s totally right. “If it’d make you feel better, you can write out step by step instructions on exactly how to cook and serve lasagna and email them to me before you get on the plane.”

“But will you actually read the email.”

He shrugs nonchalantly, flashing me a cheeky smirk in the brief moment he takes to glance my direction. “Will there be a quiz on it later?”

“Maybe.”

“You’re so fucking ridiculous.”

“I just wanna make sure the people I love are fed properly in my absence!” I exclaim defensively.
“They will be fed, you have my word.” He tells me in a tone that almost sounds sincere. *Almost*. “They might not be fed *perfectly* sized and shaped portions of lasagna, but they will be fed.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Are you gonna stop freaking the fuck out about nothing now, or is there something else you wanna spend the rest of the ride to LAX needlessly worrying about?”

Yup. He knows me too well.

He’s lucky I’m feeling merciful this morning, because I could easily exaggerate my already “ridiculous” fretting and make the remainder of this drive hell for him. But since traffic around LAX is already making him homicidal, I decide to keep my “needless worrying” within the confines of my own head.

We hadn’t discussed whether or not he would be coming into the airport with me. In the past he’s just dropped me off at departures, but on those occasions we were only saying goodbye for a day or two. Not two weeks. So it doesn’t come as too much of a surprise when he gets in the lane for short term parking instead of departures. On the one hand, I’m relieved that we don’t have to share a quick curb-side kiss and hug. On the other, I know it’s going to be even harder to walk away from him in the airport than it would be outside.

Once he’s finally found a place to park, we force ourselves out of the car and start unloading my luggage. He tries to take both of our minds off of our impending goodbye by bitching about how much stuff I’m taking with me. I can tell it’s a distraction, because he didn’t find the fact that I “pack like a chick” as annoying when we were putting the bags into the car back at the house. But I play along, making excuses for the amount of clothing I’m taking with me (Tulsa weather and temperatures aren’t as predictable and consistent as Los Angeles at this time of year! I need to be prepared!). If this was one of our real bickering matches, he’d be putting much more effort into his insults, and I’d be doing a better job of intentionally inspiring those insults. It keeps us sufficiently distracted until we get to the bag drop counter, though.

And just when I think the conversation is over, Tommy makes a point of telling the airline employee that he’s *not* traveling today, it’s just me, and therefore both suitcases are mine. Because I really am the chick from Hanson.

I probably should’ve seen that coming.

“Wanna get a coffee or something before you go through security?” He suggests lightly, like he
doesn’t care either way.

But he does, because coffee is pretty much the only excuse we have to put off saying goodbye for another twenty minutes. “Sure. I think I have enough time.”

Even if I didn’t have enough time, and staying on this side of security long enough to drink a cup of coffee would mean that I would then have to run all the way to my gate and possibly beg (or bribe) the gate attendant to reopen the doors and let me on the plane, I probably still would have done it. Caffeine and Tommy are my two biggest addictions in life! I rarely say no to either unless I have a damn good reason (and apparently I don’t consider missing my flight to be a damn good reason).

We wander through the terminal to the Starbucks, hand in hand and silent. All of the teasing and bickering we’ve done up until this point to keep ourselves from dwelling on my departure no longer feels necessary. Now we just want to enjoy our last few minutes together.

At first neither of us speaks except to order our drinks. I only let go of his hand long enough to pay for them, but as soon as my wallet is back in my pocket, my fingers are laced with his. The way his thumb gently caress the back of mine is quietly comforting. He can reassure me without a word; the slightest touch from him can remind me to breathe when I’m tense, calm me down when I’m angry, or bring a smile to my face when I’m sad. No one else in my life has ever had the ability to do that for me. It’s one of the many reasons it’s so hard to be away from him for extended periods of time.

I know it’s pathetic. I’m a grown man, and I don’t need him around to hold my hand every day. It’s just that… life is better when he is. And I don’t know anyone who wouldn’t choose that over the alternative, or who wouldn’t miss it when it’s gone. Whether it’s for years, months, or mere weeks.

“What’re you going to do for the rest of the afternoon?” I ask him in an attempt to break the staring match he’s having with the lid of his coffee cup. “Just hang out at home, or…?”

“I think I’m gonna take Duke out for a hike at Wildwood Canyon or something. Maybe stop in and see how mom’s doing before I pick the kids up.”

“A hike sounds good.”

He shrugs one shoulder indifferently. “We’ve been so busy the last few days that he hasn’t had any decent walks. And I figure getting out of the house is probably a smart idea anyway.”
“Yeah, probably.” I agree, reaching across the small table between us and curling my pointer finger around his. “Plus, getting out of the city always cheers you up.”

“That’s ’cause this city is a fucking shit heap. A sun drenched shit heap covered in hundred dollar bills and diamonds, but still… shit heap.”

It takes me a moment to stop myself from laughing long enough to swallow my mouthful of coffee, thereby avoiding spitting it all over him or having it come out of my nose. “You don’t mean that. You pretend to hate L.A. but you never talk about leaving. If you really despised it as much as you say, you’d at least fantasize about living somewhere else.”

“I do. Or... I did. I guess I don’t so much anymore.” He sighs as he trails the tip of his finger around the edge of his cup. “You and the kids make it bearable. And our house doesn’t suck. Everywhere else I ever lived was like right in the city, even if it was technically the suburbs. There was always a main street or a freeway a few blocks away, and a Starbucks within walking distance, and you could hear traffic as soon as you opened a door or a window, you know? None of that stuff’s true anymore. It makes it easier to pretend we don’t really live in L.A.”

“Well, I’m glad it’s ‘bearable’, but I wish you actually liked where we live.”

“I like our house.”

“That’s not the same thing.”

“It’s where we live, isn’t it?” He argues semi-seriously.

“You know what I mean!”

“I know, and I appreciate it. But I’m fine.” I wish I could believe him, but I’m pretty sure I don’t. And I guess he can tell that I’m more than a little skeptical, because he squeezes my finger reassuringly. “I’m fine.”

“I want you to be better than fine.”
“And what do we say about getting what you want?”

I chuckle softly, rolling my eyes as I grudgingly admit defeat. For now. “That you can’t always.”

“Good boy.”

The longer we sit just outside of the small airport Starbucks, the harder it is to ignore the people making their way towards the security checkpoint. It’s just a few, at first. Then a few more a moment later. But it’s not long before the trickle of travelers becomes a steady stream, and a line quickly begins to form. Neither of us wants to be the first to point out that I should probably join that line before it gets any longer and leaves me at risk of missing my flight. But whether we say it out loud or not, we’re both aware of it.

I get out of my seat without a word and pick up my carry-on bag from beside the chair, and he silently follows suit.

“I can’t believe the clinic didn’t call.” He grumbles disapprovingly. “I bet they fucking call as soon as you get through security.”

“Probably.” I commiserate. “I can call them now and see if they have the results, if you want?”

For a moment he seems to seriously consider the idea, but when I see his shoulders slump, I know he’s going to turn the offer down. “I don’t want us to be those annoying assholes who can’t wait for a damn phone call.”

“I’m sure we wouldn’t be the only over-zealous intended parents they’ve ever dealt with.”

“I know, but I still don’t wanna be those people, you know? They’ll call when they call, and we’ll just have to deal.”

I wish I could think of something to say or do that might lift his spirits a little, but short of me canceling my trip to Tulsa, I don’t think anything is going to bring a genuine smile to his face right now.
“I’ll call you when I land.”

“Okay.” He nods, stuffing his hands into his pockets as he gazes steadfastly at the floor.

“It’s only two weeks.” I remind him hopefully, but I immediately hate myself for doing so. He *knows* it’s only two weeks, but knowing that doesn’t make it *feel* like such an insignificant amount of time. And it probably won’t until it’s over. “The kids will probably keep you so busy that it’ll fly by.”

Shut up, Taylor!

“Probably.” He takes a deep breath, plastering a smile on his face for my benefit when he finally looks up at me. “And you’re gonna have rehearsals every day, and family stuff…”

“You can still call me whenever you want to. You know that, right?”

He rolls his eyes at me, brushing my sincere suggestion aside. “You’ll be working. I’m not gonna be calling you ten times a fucking day like some needy little bitch.”

“But if you *want* to-”

“We’re gonna talk every night anyway. Anything I need to tell you can wait until then.”

Why does he have to be so stubborn? “But if it can’t wait, or you don’t want to wait-”

“I’ll call.” He agrees, probably just to shut me up.

“Just… think about two weeks from today.” I tell him as I reach out and give a gentle tug on the sleeve of his jacket, pulling his hand out of his pocket and using it to coax him into a hug. “You’ll come and pick me up from the airport, and-”

“I dunno. I hate driving through arrivals; I might make you take a cab or something.”
I pull back a little and narrow my eyes at him playfully, which is apparently enough to bring a heartfelt smile to his face. “As I was saying, when you pick me up in two weeks, we’ll have the whole afternoon together before the kids get home from school. And if our reunion on the backseat of my dad’s car a few months ago is anything to go by, it’s gonna be one hell of an afternoon.”

“True.”

“Don’t sound so excited about it.”

His smile falters for a moment before he leans in and kisses me gently. “It’s not that I’m not excited...”

“But?”

“We could go home right now and have one hell of an afternoon without spending two weeks apart first.” He explains simply. “I don’t need to go without it to appreciate how good it is.”

“Sorry.” I sigh as my forehead falls gently against his. “I was just trying to-”

“I know you were.”

“I hate this.”

“Me too.”

“Why can’t I just take you with me?” I pout pathetically.

“Because we have five kids, and one of us has to stay home and pretend to be a responsible adult whenever the other one is off being a rockstar.”

“Right.”
“Stop pouting. It makes me wanna do things to you that those TSA agents over there would probably disapprove of.”

“Fuck ‘em, they’re no fun.” I reply with a mischievous smile. “They could use a little ‘action’ to break up the soul sucking monotony of their day.”

I swear his eyes actually light up as his smile grows a little wider than before. I can’t decide if it’s more hilarious or hot that he apparently finds my rebellious, brazen side so attractive.

Maybe it’s not about attraction at all, though.

Maybe it’s pride, because he knows that he brings it out in me.

Without another word, I lean in and capture his mouth with my own, and he eagerly responds by grabbing my jacket and pulling me up against him. I wish kisses like these didn’t make it so much harder to leave, but no way in hell would I ever consider skipping them. It’s a necessary part of the letting go process, possibly the most necessary. Besides, we say so much in these moments of silence, it negates the need to actually say the word goodbye afterwards.

Our kisses gradually become slower, softer, winding down until our lips reluctantly part. But he doesn’t let go of me. “I’ll call you when I land.”

“You said that already.” He smiles sadly. “Now you’re just dragging it out.”

“I wouldn’t have to if you’d let go of my jacket.”

Narrowing his eyes at me in playful scorn, he shoves me gently away from him. “Fuck you. Have a nice fucking flight. I hope you don’t crash or whatever.”

I have to bite my lip for a few seconds to stop myself from laughing as he turns and walks away from me. But once I’ve successfully suppressed the urge to giggle at his theatrics, I clear my throat and call out to him.

“Hey!” He glances over his shoulder at me, and when I blow him a conciliatory kiss, he grabs it from thin air and plants it right on his ass.
Then he winks at me before continuing his departure from the terminal.

And that’s how it’s done.

With the most painful parts of my day over (assuming the plane doesn’t crash), I make my way through security, double check that the gate for my flight hasn’t changed since I checked in, grab another Starbucks, and embark on a fruitless search for a magazine I might actually want to read.

For the first time ever, I find myself giving the small section of pregnancy related magazines a brief once over. Usually I don’t even notice them, let alone consider picking one up. And given the fact that I have five kids, and have therefore witnessed five pregnancies first hand (not to mention five births), I doubt there’s much in these magazines that I’d find helpful. Especially because I’m not the one who is pregnant, and I don’t even live with the person carrying my future child. I don’t need to know about the latest maternity style trends, or tips for sex during pregnancy. However, when I spot a magazine cover claiming to have answers to questions about blood pressure changes, explanations for the baby’s kicks, and the complete list of pre-natal vitamins every pregnant woman should be taking, I almost start to reach for it.

Luckily I’m interrupted by a boarding announcement for my flight. It’s like another hand appeared out of nowhere and slapped the hand of my inner control-freak away before it could so much as touch the cover of the magazine. Which is definitely for the best, because I’m determined not to be a control-freak about this.

Well… not as much of one as I usually am.

I know me, and sometimes the more information I have on a subject, the worse it is for everyone else. I do not want Shauntae to hate me by the time the baby is born because I spent eight months calling her on a daily basis to see if she checked her own blood pressure or took all of her vitamins! There’s involved, and then there’s over-involved. Even if this baby is mine and Tommy’s, Shauntae’s body isn’t. We wouldn’t have asked her to do this for us if we didn’t believe that we could trust her to do everything in her power to properly care for our baby until it’s born.

And I’m going to keep telling myself that every time that insane little voice in my head tries to convince me that I should ask her to email me a list of everything she ate, and a log of how many hours she slept, worked, and spent on her feet each day.

The flight ends up being uneventful. No turbulence, no crying babies, no spilled drinks. Kinda
makes me wish I had bought that magazine. Instead, I pass the time making notes on my phone of things that have been on my mind regarding the next two weeks of tour rehearsals, things I think we should try, things I think we should avoid, things I can totally and unnecessarily bug the crap out of my brothers with, the usual. And when I can’t come up with anything more to put on that list, I start making a list of all of the things I can think of that Tommy and I need to do in order to get ready for this new little life that’s coming into ours.

When the captain announces that we’re making our final descent into Tulsa, I actually breathe a sigh of relief. Not because I’m ready to land (although I am), but because it means that I can finally stop making lists and overwhelming myself. You might think that I could have done that at any point during the flight if I’d really wanted to.

You would be wrong.

But when I turn airplane mode off on my phone just after we touch down on the tarmac, the texts, emails and calls I missed over the course of my three hours in the air begin popping up on the screen in quick succession, leaving my phone buzzing repeatedly in my hand. It’s not until I notice that I have a voicemail that I remember the phone call Tommy and I were so anxiously waiting for this morning. Suddenly any patience I have for the other passengers on this plane to disembark is gone, and I have to grip my arm rests to stop myself from getting out of my seat and pushing my way through the crowds of weary travelers packed into the airplane aisle.

As soon as I’m off of the plane, I run through the terminal towards baggage claim, hoping like hell that my dad is already here to meet me. But he’s not, Zac is.

“Hey!” He greets me cheerfully, opening his arms for a hug. “How was your-”

“I need your phone!”

“I missed you, too.” He retorts in mock offense, even as he digs his iPhone out of the pocket of his coat. “What’s wrong with your phone.”

“Nothing.” I tell him distractedly. “Thanks! I’ll be right back!”

“But…”

I leave him standing beside a baggage carousel in total bewilderment while I head off in search of a
quiet corner that I can make a phone call from. That quiet corner happens to be in the nearest family restroom, because it’s the only place where I can lock everyone else out and have a private conversation. I feel a little guilty commandeering one of the only family restrooms in the whole airport, but given the situation, I think I can be forgiven.

I punch in the code to unlock Zac’s phone, and pull up his contacts. I don’t bother scrolling through to the T’s, because I know Tommy isn’t in there under his actual name. He’s under B, for “Buttmunch”.

My little brother’s maturity knows no bounds.

But before I hit the button to call him, I hesitate. Should I listen to the voicemail from the clinic first? We wanted to listen to it together, but what if it’s bad news? I check the time quickly to see if it’s likely he already has the kids with him or not. It could go either way…

Taking a deep breath, I press the button on Zac’s phone to request a FaceTime chat and wait somewhat patiently for Tommy to accept. When he still hasn’t answered after half a dozen rings, my heart begins to sink. It probably means he’s driving, or busy picking the kids up from school...

Suddenly he accepts the call, and I don’t miss the look of trepidation (and dread) on his face right before he sees my face on the screen. “Oh, hey! I shoulda known it’d be you. No way would Zac wanna FaceTime with me.”

“Is that why it took you a week to answer? Because you thought it was Zac?”

“Yeah, and you’re lucky I answered at all.” He retorts pettily. “Why are you FaceTiming me from Zac’s phone anyway? And where the fuck are you?”

His question prompts me to start paying attention to his surroundings instead of that beautiful face of his. He’s in his car, but judging by the quiet on his end of the line, I doubt any of the kids are in the backseat.

“I’m in a bathroom at the airport.”

“Oh.” He frowns for a second, and then his eyes widen a little in surprise. “Oh. Seriously? You wanna FaceTime fuck me on Zac’s phone? I can’t decide if that’s too weird or just weird enough
“I don’t wanna have phone sex!” I laugh. “I mean… I wouldn’t say no, but it’s not why I called.”

His face falls again as he heaves a disheartened sigh. “I guess that’s for the best. I doubt I’d win ‘Parent of The Year’ for jacking off in my car in an elementary school parking lot.”

I’m so busy cracking up over his comment that I momentarily can’t even remember why I called him in the first place. Until I glance down at my own phone screen and see the thirty-seven second voicemail still waiting to be played.

“I’m not even gonna attempt to respond to that statement. But to answer your original question, I’m calling you on Zac’s phone because the clinic left a voicemail on mine, and I can’t talk to you on my phone and play the voicemail on it at the same time.”

“Oh…” He takes a deep breath, and I automatically do the same. Again. “Did you listen to it yet?”

“No. I didn’t wanna know anything before you did.”

“On the one hand, I totally appreciate that. On the other, I kinda wish you did know. I think I’d prefer to hear it from you, whatever it is.”

“It’s gonna be good news.”

“Don’t fucking jinx it!” He exclaims. “Jesus, why would you say that out loud?!”

“We got nine positive home pregnancy test results. We know we’re having a baby; the beta test is just a formality.”

“You don’t know that.”

“But I feel it.” I insist, momentarily wondering if my confidence is as genuine as it sounds or if it’s a front I’m putting on for his sake. “So… is now a good time to listen to it, or...?”
“Now’s as good a time as any.” He tells me almost resignedly. “Let’s hear it.”

I tap the play button on the voicemail on my phone, immediately followed by the speaker button as I hold it up closer to Zac’s phone to make sure Tommy can hear it. I almost flinch as a perky female voice fills the room I’m in, bouncing off of the tiled walls and sounding louder than I know it actually is.

“Hi Taylor, this is Deanna calling from Doctor O’Conner’s office. We have the results of Shauntae’s beta HCG test from yesterday, and I understand you requested that someone call to update you on that.” She explains very cheerfully, which I take as a good sign. I sure as hell hope she doesn’t deliver bad news to people in this tone! “It looks like it came back at two hundred and fifty three-” I instinctively squeeze my eyes shut as a painfully wide smile spreads across my face, and I can hear Tommy exhale a sigh of relief mingled with a quiet chuckle. I wish so much that he was here right now so that I could hug him rather than just beaming at him through a crappy phone camera. “That’s a very promising result, and now we’ll just be looking for that number to have doubled when Shauntae comes in for her second beta test tomorrow. I’ll give you a call with those results once we have them… probably the day after tomorrow. Until then, if you have any questions, please don’t hesitate to give us a call back. Have a great day!”

“We’re pregnant.” I affirm once the voicemail has ended. “Officially.”

“Not until we get the second beta test results back.” He argues in an attempt to keep his hopes from soaring too high. “If the number doesn’t double-”

“It will! It’s already really good.”

“Just… lemme be a pessimistic jerk for a couple more days, okay?”

“Fine. But when those results come back, and that number has doubled, you are going to be excited.” I demand in my most no-nonsense tone. “You have to celebrate sooner or later.”

“Later it is!” He smirks. “Listen, school just let out, so I’m gonna go meet the kids, okay?”

“Okay. Tell them I love them!”
“I will. Tell Zac thanks for letting you borrow his phone.”

Wow. This must be some kind of miracle! “I will.”

“And also to go fuck himself.”

Or not. “I won’t.”

“Love you, loser.”

“Love you, too.”

He leans in and exaggeratedly kisses the camera on his phone, which leaves me grinning even wider than the test results did. Even after the call is over, and his face is no longer on the screen, I stand in the middle of the family restroom and stare at Zac’s phone, wearing what I can only assume is an incredibly dopey smile. If I walked out of this room right now, people would probably think I’d been in here getting high.

I swear I’m more in love with Tommy right now that I was just a few hours ago. I’m not sure how that’s even possible, though. When does it become impossible to love someone any more than you already do? Is there any limit to how much you can love another person? At what point do you stop falling in love with them? I always assumed that you eventually had to stop falling in love and simply be in love. Once you knew everything about the other person, and you’d been together for years, and things weren’t always exciting and new. But apparently, if that place exists, I’m not there yet. Because I’m still falling for him.

Every time I think that I’m as in love as I could possibly be, I realize that there’s more.
Chapter 47

Chapter Notes

I know I've been updating every couple of weeks, and I plan to continue doing that. But I wanted to post this one sooner because, even though I believe it's a necessary chapter, it's not all that exciting. lol There'll be another chapter (from Tommy's POV) within the next 2 weeks. As always, thanks for your patience!

Staying at my parent’s house as a thirty-two year old man is pretty strange for me. I haven’t stayed in their home without my kids in… years. Well over a decade. When the kids are with me, all of my mother’s maternal energy gets directed at them rather than me. But without them here, all of her over-attentive fussing goes directly to yours truly. I’m not saying it doesn’t have its perks; home cooked meals every morning and evening are nothing to complain about, and I don’t miss doing my own laundry (I didn’t ask her to do it!). But I have to keep reminding myself that I’m an adult, because she’s treating me like I’m twelve all over again.

Even when I was twelve, I was pretty self-sufficient. You kinda have to be when you have four younger siblings. So at thirty-two, I’m having a hard time letting her run around after me the way she has been since I got into town last week.

But how do you tell a mother to stop mothering, regardless of how old their “child” is?

Dia still does it to Tommy. Not to the same extent that my mom has with me this past week, but
that’s only because Dia gets to see Tommy all the time. If she saw him as infrequently as my mom sees me, I’m sure his complaints about her “smothering him” would actually be sincere rather than him simply being a little shit.

Not that he’s been complaining about anything she does lately, not even jokingly, and that’s completely understandable. Even if it didn’t feel inappropriate to him, he’s been too exhausted to say or do anything that doesn’t need to be said or done. He’s single handedly taking care of five crazy kids, a rambunctious dog, and his sick mother. Well… I guess single handedly might not be a fair statement. Lisa helps out with Dia a lot, and I know that Ezra and Penny are helping out with their younger brothers and sister as much as possible. But they still need parenting, too.

I try not to beat myself up too much for not being there, because I know Tommy doesn’t resent me for it. Besides, if I’m not one hundred percent immersed in rehearsals, my brothers will notice. If my mind is elsewhere, it shows. Maybe not to anyone else, but we’ve worked together long enough for them to know when I’m not fully committed to something, no matter how enthusiastic I pretend to be. And as understanding as they are about my current situation, they don’t have bottomless reservoirs of patience. We’re already trying to cram the three or four weeks of rehearsals we usually have before a tour into only two weeks. And we had to cut more than half a dozen potential tour stops off of the list in order accommodate my weekly trips to California while we’re on the road.

The least I can do is give them my all when I am present.

But not thinking about it all day at rehearsals means that I think about it pretty much constantly from the moment I leave our practice space in the evening until I return again the next morning. Mom catches me “spacing out” at least once a day, and I can tell that it’s starting to worry her. The seemingly innocent questions she poses over dinner are starting to feel more and more like prying. And if dad thinks I’m oblivious to how intently he watches me, studies me as I answer those questions, he’s crazy. I’m not sure what information it is they think I’m withholding, because I haven’t been intentionally keeping anything from them. Except for how stressed out and guilty I feel.

And the fact that, as of a few days ago when Shauntae’s second beta test results came through, they officially have another grandchild on the way.

Okay, so maybe there is some stuff I’ve been intentionally keeping from them…

“How did rehearsals go today?” Dad asks amiably, in the way I assume most fathers ask their kids how their day at school was. Being homeschooled, I wouldn’t know. “Still think you’re on track?”

“As much as we ever are.”
“You’ll be fine.” Mom assures me. “As long as you have the new material down, the rest will come back to you.”

“Like riding a bike.” Dad concurs with a confident nod. “It’s not as if you boys are new at this.”

“I know, but it never hurts to be as prepared as possible.” Although, even when we are as prepared as possible, that doesn’t mean we’re immune to screwing up.

The conversation comes to a standstill, and suddenly the sound of knives and forks on plates is more like nails on chalkboard. I glance at my sister, hoping that she has something to contribute. And she just stares back at me in confusion, frozen mid-mouthful, completely unsure of what it is I want from her. Mom and dad seem to be having a silent exchange of their own. It doesn’t feel so silent to me, though. Whether they say it out loud or not, I can practically hear them arguing over whose turn it is to brave a new topic. Another attempt at getting me tell them whatever it is they want to know.

“So…” Mom eventually begins, forcing a smile as she focuses her gaze on me. “Did you get to talk to Tommy and the kids today?”

That’s what they were so apprehensive to talk to me about? I swear my parents are losing their minds. “I texted with Tommy a little before rehearsals this morning. It was still pretty early in L.A., so the kids were busy getting ready for school. But I’m gonna talk to them later tonight.”

“Can I say hi?” Zoe asks hopefully. “I won’t hog the whole call, I promise.”

“Yeah, of course.” I roll my eyes at her. “You didn’t even have to ask.”

“How have things been going back home?” Dad questions, diverting the conversation back to its original topic. “Has Tommy had much help from Jenna and Lisa this past week?”

“Not so much from Lisa, she’s got enough on her plate right now. But I think Jenna’s supposed to be babysitting this weekend so he can go out for the night.”

“Does he have any plans?” Inquires mom in that same innocuous tone she’s been using whenever the subject of Tommy and the kids comes up. It just doesn’t feel quite as harmless as she makes it
sound.

“One of his friends is having a party.

“Any special occasion, or just because?”

“A bit of both, I guess. It’s a ‘Baby Daddy Shower’.”

Zoe laughs, almost choking on the mouthful of water she just took. “What’s a ‘Baby Daddy Shower’?”

“I think it’s kinda like a bachelor party.” I smirk. “His wife is having a baby in a couple of months, so I guess this is his last hurrah. She gets to have a party with her girlfriends and receive lots of baby gifts, and he gets to go out to a bar with his best friends, pretend to be ten years younger than he actually is, and have them ‘shower’ him with drinks.”

“Sounds fair.” She chuckles in amusement.

“Does he even want to have a baby?” Mom frowns. “I’ve never heard of a man needing to have a ‘last hurrah’ before becoming a father.”

“I don’t think it’s that he doesn’t want to have a baby, I think he’s just…”

“Getting it out of his system.” Offers dad in an attempt to be helpful. Though I’m not sure it actually did help all that much, because mom still looks put off by the idea. “I’m sure it’s just a bit of fun.”

“Right.”

And with that, another topic is shot in the face.

This is why I don’t always give them all the information! I shoulda just told them that Tommy was going to hang out with some friends and left it at that. But no, I had to be completely honest. I don’t care what anyone says (including me), honesty is not always the best policy.
I know this isn’t about Tommy’s friend throwing a party to get his former, childless life ‘out of is system’. My mom isn’t a total square; she probably would have found the whole thing as benign as my dad did if it weren’t for the fact that Tommy and I are hoping to have a baby of our own soon. Apparently Tommy attending his friend’s ‘baby daddy shower’ is the same thing as him having one of his own in her mind. And now she’s probably worried that he’s not ready to give up his crazy, party animal ways.

Even though he never really had any crazy, party animal ways, and any he did have, he happily gave up when he moved in with me and the kids.

We manage to make it through the rest of the meal without me saying anything else to get myself or Tommy in trouble. At least, I think I do. But I inadvertently put myself in a position to ruin that when I offer to do the dishes. I was just trying to be nice, but you know what they say: Nice guys finish last.

And find themselves trapped in the kitchen by their mother with no good excuse to escape.

“You should go and relax.” I tell her, trying to sound considerate rather than cornered. “You made dinner-”

“And you worked hard all day.” She insists, handing me a dish towel and shooing me away from the sink. “I’ll wash, you dry.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

At first I let the running water fill the silence. But once the sink is full of soapy water, and she’s spent what feels like a good minute or two scrubbing the first of the dinner plates, I swear the room seems so quiet that I can hear a clock ticking. Which is weird, because the only clock in the kitchen is the digital oven clock.

And it doesn’t tick!

“Okay, spit it out.”
“Excuse me?” Mom exclaims in surprise. “Spit what out?”

“Whatever it is you want to say to me.”

“I.”

“I know that you want to ask me something, or tell me something, and the longer you wait to do it, the more convinced I become that it’s nothing good. So please just spit it out, or rip off the band aid, or… something less gross that doesn’t involve saliva or scabs.”

She laughs wearily as she shakes her head at me, and I guess the fact that she finds this amusing and doesn’t really look all that guilty should be comforting to me. But it’s not. “I’m sorry if I’ve done something to put you so on edge. You don’t need to be.”

“So you’re telling me you have nothing to say to me? Nothing to ask me? Nothing you’ve been worried about and avoiding discussing with me?” I narrow my eyes at her skeptically. “At all?”

“I won’t lie… I have been worried about something.” She finally admits. “But I wasn’t sure how to bring it up without upsetting you.”

Uh oh… “Why would it upset me?”

“Because you’re very sensitive when it comes to the subject of Tommy, and the two of you having a baby, and the surrogacy... arrangement.”

“Mom-”

“And that’s understandable.” She quickly interjects before I can tell her how much I do not want to discuss this with her if she has nothing positive or constructive to say. “But the more I’ve thought about it since you told us your plans, the more concerned I’ve become.”

“About what? The fact that we’re using a surrogate to have a baby?”
“About the fact that you’re having a baby at all.”

I take a deep breath, trying to keep my emotions in check and remain calm enough to continue having a conversation with her rather than an argument. “What about it concerns you?”

“The timing, I suppose. The circumstances surrounding the decision…”

“What circumstances?” I frown in genuine confusion.

“Well, Dia’s health, for one thing.” She points out gently. “I can understand how it might prompt Tommy to want to do something like this-”

“Dia’s health had nothing to do with our decision. We’d already started the process before she even told us she was sick. We even considered putting our plans on hold because of it, but we decided we didn’t want to wait any longer than we already have.”

“Okay, but what about everything Tommy was going through earlier this year?” She continues to press. “You told me yourself that he was restless and felt as though he was in a rut. And, again, I can understand why he might think that having a baby would break him out of whatever rut he’s in, but I don’t think it will. If he’s having problems, or if the two of you are having problems-”

“We’re not having problems, mom. I don’t know how many times you want me to say it! This isn’t one of those ‘having a baby to save the marriage’ situations, it’s not a desperate attempt at filling some void in our lives or our relationship.”

“Well obviously one or both of you feels like something is missing.”

“The only thing we feel we’re missing is the experience of having a baby together. That’s all we want. We love our kids, and they love Tommy. But he never had the chance to be there for everything; for all of the excitement and anticipation of the pregnancy, and the feeling of seeing his child being born and hearing that first cry. And walking around like a zombie because the baby only sleeps for two hours at a time, and not being able to find a clean shirt because there’s spit up on every piece of clothing you own, and all the other amazing and awful stuff that comes with having a newborn baby. And I never got to do all of those things with him. When I first told you guys we were doing this, you said you understood that.”
“I did. I do, but-”

“Just… try to imagine if you’d had us before you met dad. You were married to someone else, and he died, and then you met dad. You fell madly in love, and got married… wouldn’t you want to have a baby with him, regardless of how many kids you already had? Wouldn’t you want to experience and share that with him?”

“I’m sure I would.” She concedes. “But if your father had just lost a job he loved, and found out that his mother was very sick, I don’t know that I’d feel comfortable with him making any huge, life altering decisions until things had settled down and I knew that he was thinking clearly and doing things for the right reasons.”

“Like I said, we made this decision before Dia knew she was sick, and we were talking about the idea of having another kid before he lost his job. This isn’t what you seem to think it is, I promise. Tommy and I even talked about the fact that we wanted to make sure there were no other reasons we were doing this besides the right ones, and I know we’re not. Trust me, mom, we’re doing this because it’s what we both want, because we love each other and we want to share this experience. That’s the only reason.”

Her eyes study my face for a moment, scrutinizing every frown line, every blink, and probably even over-analyzing the degree to which the corners of my mouth turn up or down. Until she finally seems to believe what I’ve said, and she takes a long, deep, relieved breath. I’d feel bad for her having been so anxious about this, if it wasn’t for the fact that she did it to herself and it was totally unnecessary.

As usual.

“I’m sorry.”

“For what?” I ask, feigning cluelessness.

“You know what.”

“Assuming my marriage is in trouble?”

“I didn’t-”
“Again.” My tone is light, playful, even though I have every right to be pissed off. I know she doesn’t question the stability of my brother’s marriages, or my sister’s the way she questions mine. She doesn’t need to be reassured that things are okay with them, it’s just assumed. And if I didn’t know that her concern for my relationship comes from a place of love and genuine concern rather than judgment, maybe I would be storming out of this room right now and leaving her to do the dishes alone.

Sometimes I wonder if it’s my own fault. Maybe if I hadn’t lied to everyone for most of my life, if I hadn’t pretended to be someone I wasn’t, and feel things that I didn’t, she wouldn’t doubt my sincerity when I tell her that I’m happy. She used to assume it when I was married to Natalie. She thought I was in love, and that I had everything I wanted. And after thirty years of looking at me and believing that she actually saw me, that what was right in front of her was real, she found out that I’d been faking my way through my life. It was a front, a facade.

When I think about it like that, her anxiety and doubt doesn’t seem quite so insane.

“I don’t mean to assume the worst.” She sighs apologetically. “It’s just hard, with you living so far away. I know we still talk a lot, but it’s mostly about the kids, or what’s been going on here. Sometimes it feels like we never really talk about you and what’s going on in your life.”

“I didn’t realize.”

“I know. I’m not accusing you of keeping things from us, and I know that we don’t necessarily have the best track record when it comes to being understanding. We probably make it difficult for you to confide in us, because in the past we’ve reacted badly to certain things.”

“It’s not that.” I insist earnestly. “I mean, yeah, sometimes I get nervous about telling you guys stuff, but I think that’s normal parent-kid relationship stuff, you know? I don’t think it has anything to do with how you’ve taken things in the past.”

She shakes her head faintly, her gaze falling from my face and focusing on the soapy water in the sink. “I’m not so sure.”

I hate seeing her like this. I don’t want her to believe that I’ve been intentionally keeping her at a distance when it comes to the more important parts of my life. And I definitely don’t want her thinking it’s her fault.
“If I tell you something, do you promise you won’t tell anyone?” I ask, immediately drawing her attention back to me. The surprised and eager look on her face almost makes me laugh out loud.

“What about your father?”

“Hmm…” I pretend to ponder the idea for a moment, even though I would never ask her to keep something from him. Especially not something like what I’m about to tell her. “Fine, you can tell dad. But neither of you can tell anyone else. Promise?”

“You have my word. And if you father was in here, I’m sure he’d be happy to give you his most obnoxious and inaccurate boy scout salute.”

“Okay. Since we were just talking about me, and Tommy, and us having a baby, I think now is probably a good time to tell you that our surrogate, Shauntae... is pregnant.”

Her mouth literally falls open as she gapes at me in shock, but she quickly manages to compose herself and pull me into one of her most suffocating mom hugs. I seriously cannot breathe! But I’ll take being hugged to death as a result of her excitement over a mildly enthusiastic embrace any day. I can’t tell if this same piece of news would have gotten the same reaction from her if it weren’t for the conversation we just had, but I don’t care. It doesn’t matter.

“How far along is she?” She asks me, finally giving me room to inhale. “I can’t be too long; it was less than two months ago that you told us about all of this!”

“She’s probably not even at the point where most women would think to take a test unless they were trying to get pregnant. It’s been about two and a half weeks since the embryo transfer... I’m not really sure what that works out to in pregnancy terms. Maybe four weeks? We weren’t going to tell anyone until after the third trimester, but I figure the kids will more than likely know sometime before that, and one of them would have let it slip sooner or later. Besides, Tommy told Dia, so I think it’s only fair that you and dad know, too.”

“Thank you for telling me, sweetheart.” She gushes tearfully, wrapping me in a slightly less constricting hug. “I know we weren’t very supportive about the idea when you first told us, and I’m sure that after everything I said tonight I gave you more reasons to think that we don’t view this baby as a good thing, but that’s not true.”
“I know. And I get it.” I smile understandingly as I let her go. “I blindsided you when I told you about it the first time. And not only did you not see it coming, the whole surrogacy thing was something you’d never had to give any thought to before. I know it’s probably really strange to you guys.”

“It’s taken some getting used to, I’ll admit. And I think your father is still struggling with the idea of it a little. But he’ll get there, we both will, I promise.”

“Thanks, mom.”

It’s been a long time since a conversation with either of my parents has left me feeling so… peaceful. Our regular chats aren’t strained or anything, we get along just fine ninety-nine percent of the time. But just as there are those moments when something is said that causes my defenses to shoot up, there are instances where something is said that breaks them down. Usually when I didn’t realize they were up to begin with. This was the reaction I was looking for when I sat my parents down and told them about our plans to have a baby. Granted, my mom couldn’t have hugged me via Skype even if she’d wanted to. But to have them question me rather than congratulate me left me wishing I’d never confided in them, no matter how unfair to them that may have been.

After tonight, I won’t have to think twice about sharing any baby related news with them, and that’s a huge weight off of my shoulders.

My evening only improves further when I have my Skype date with Tommy and the kids. The kids do most of the talking, and I love listening to stories about their day at school, and their friends (and I nod and pretend I know exactly who Jake, and Carmen, and Louis are, even though they have so many friends between them at this point that I’ve almost given up on trying to remember who’s who!). I don’t get to chat to Tommy much, but he lurks in the background the entire call, refereeing bickering matches about whose turn it is to talk, and whether or not someone’s time is up.

It’s the same arrangement we had earlier this summer when he was on tour; the kids get all of my time on Skype, and then Tommy and I have our “alone time” after they’ve gone to bed. Just the sound of his ringtone or the sight of his face on the caller ID screen is enough to leave me grinning when I answer his call. It’s always the highlight of my day.

“Hey.”

“Hey.” I can hear the smile in his voice, and somehow my own smile grows even wider. “What’s up?”
“Nothing.” I take a long, calming breath as I close my MacBook and push it aside on the bed. “Just making some notes for rehearsal tomorrow.”

“How’d it go today?”

“Okay, mostly. We’re pretty solid on most of the new material, but for some reason a couple of the songs are kicking our collective ass. I swear we didn’t have this much trouble with the arrangements when we recorded them!”

“They probably sound fine, but you guys like to drive yourselves totally fucking crazy.”

“They don’t sound fine.” I argue indignantly. “Ike keeps coming in late on Freak Out, and I can’t seem to remember the second verse of Man On Top to save my damn life!”

“I love that song.” He chuckles softly.

“No you don’t.”

“I do! Any song that has you singing about being on top gets two thumbs up in my book!”

“Don’t.”

“What?” He asks in his most innocent tone. I can almost see him angelically batting those crazy long eyelashes of his at me.

While wearing his most devilish smirk.

“Don’t try to make that song dirty. It’s not dirty.”

“Oh, please!” He snorts. “You can’t seriously sit there and tell me that you singing about being the man ‘on top’, that you’re ‘a hole in one’, and talking about your fist isn’t dirty.”
“It’s not! You’re taking all that stuff out of context-”

“Hey, I didn’t write the damn song.”

“No, and you’re not the one who has to get up on stage and sing it with a straight face, either. So just… shh !”

“Yes, sir.” He replies obediently, but I can already tell he’s not going to give in that easily. “You are the man on top, after all.”

“And don’t you forget it.”
When I told Taylor that I could handle everything at home while he was on the road, I meant it. I wholeheartedly believed it. Well… I more than half-heartedly believed it. I think there’ll always be that dumbass voice in the back of my mind telling me I can’t do anything, let alone take care of five kids by myself for two whole weeks. But over the last few years, I’ve been learning not to listen to that voice. It’s usually wrong, and paying it any attention at all never leads to anything good.

But this time, I think I should’ve listened when it told me how completely fucked I was going to be.

This time, the voice was totally right.

It’s a damn miracle we’re all still alive, honestly. And that social services hasn’t come to remove the kids from my care, or at least look around the house to make sure they’re not suffering from neglect!

Okay, maybe that’s a bit melodramatic. Just because they’ve been late to school almost everyday since Taylor left, and have been sent to school with less than nutritious lunches and only half of their homework complete does not give anyone grounds to take them away from me. But I still kinda feel
I bet Taylor didn’t screw everything up this bad when I went off on tour in June. He was probably on top of things, he had it all under control. I stupidly thought I could do the same, that I wasn’t going to be losing my shit by day ten. He’s actually good with chaos, though. I’m not, I fucking hate it! At least, I hate it when he’s not here to make it feel less overwhelming. Our crazy life is less exhausting when we tackle it together. When it’s me and him against the world, we always win.

But when it’s just me, I get slaughtered.

I’m so fucking tired. I can barely keep my eyes open through dinner most nights; I don’t really have the energy to lift the fucking fork to my mouth and eat! But even once the kids are asleep, and I’m free to retreat to my own bed and get some much needed rest, I can’t. I can’t stop thinking about what I need to do the next day, and the day after that, reminding myself to do things that I know I’m going to have forgotten by the time the sun comes up.

Besides, I can’t sleep when he’s not here.

I mean, I sleep. Sort of. But not until like two in the morning, and not for more than an hour or so at a time. It’s not exactly restful, and I definitely don’t wake up feeling recharged and ready to face another day when my alarm goes off.

I have to, though. And I’d better get used to this, because it’s not over when he gets back from rehearsals in a few days. Not even close. And just because he’ll be home two days a week during tour, that doesn’t mean I’m going to be any less of a zombie. I still have to go five days at a time without him.

I’m so fucking glad he didn’t listen to me when I told him he was an idiot for wanting to come home on a weekly basis. How the fuck did I think I was going to survive single parenthood for two whole fucking months?! It hasn’t even been two whole weeks yet and I already feel like I’m drowning. And I don’t think this is one of those situations where you suddenly rise to the occasion just when it looks like you’re out for the count.

This isn’t a goddamn Lifetime movie of the week.

This is the kind of situation where things go from bad to worse to irreparably fucked, and the more you try to fix it, the more of a mess you make.
These kids deserve so much fucking better than my shit-tacular brand of parenting.

“Riv, did you brush your teeth?” I ask wearily as I push his bedroom door open enough to peer inside.

He doesn’t look up from the comic book in his hands, but at least he responds. “Yeah.”

“So if I come over there and smell your breath it’ll be minty fresh, right?”

I watch knowingly as his eyes slowly drift from the pages of his comic and over to my face. He seems to consider his options for a moment; for all he knows, if he says ‘yeah’, I’ll just accept it and leave. God knows I’m tired enough to seriously consider it. But he seems to be under the impression that I’m a responsible adult who actually follows through on shit like this, because he sighs as he tosses his comic aside before dragging himself off of the bed and trudging past me out of the room.

“How about you, Viggo?”

“I brushed.” He tells me so sincerely that I know he’s telling me the truth. “You can smell my mouth!”

“Thanks, dude. I believe you, though.”

“Tommy?”

“Yeah?”

I feel like falling to the floor and throwing an Asta-style fit when he holds a book out to me. I know what he’s about to ask me to do, and I don’t wanna! “Will you read this with me?”

“Uh… can we do it another night? I’m really tired.”
“Then how about I read it to you, and you can just listen?” He proposes kindly, making it pretty much impossible for me to reject the offer without feeling like a giant douche.

“Sure. But just for a little while, okay?”

“Okay!”

After ‘a little while’ of listening to Viggo reading ‘Horrid Henry’ to me, I fall asleep. And Viggo being Viggo, he doesn’t have the heart to wake me up for over an hour. I’m sure that decision got plenty of support from River, who would probably sell his soul for an extra hour with the lights on before bed.

Penny and Ezra are less sneaky, though, and I’m grateful to find that they’re both in bed with the lights out when I dutifully check on them on my way to bed. I had been looking forward to indulging in a drink (or two) once they were all asleep for the night. But I seriously don’t have the energy to go all the way downstairs and pour myself one. Forget staying awake long enough to drink it! I can barely keep my eyes open and keep my mind focused long enough to say more than “goodnight” to Taylor when he calls for our nightly chat. It figures that the best part of my day is the part I’m too tired to really enjoy.

We don’t get to talk for long anyway, because his phone battery is dying and I have to get to bed so that I can get up at the ass crack of dawn. I have to make sure the kids are on time for school tomorrow. Not just because they should be on time every day, but because my mom has an appointment that I have to get her to first thing tomorrow morning, and if I’m late dropping them off, I’ll be late picking her up.

Her doctors did a whole bunch of tests this afternoon, so her appointment tomorrow is basically a progress report on how well the chemo worked and whether or not they’re going to adjust their original treatment plan or keep doing what they’ve been doing. Hopefully they’ll just tell her that everything looks good and send her off for her next dose of poison.

She doesn’t seem worried, so I’m trying not to be.

I wake up from another shitty night of something resembling sleep to find a text from Taylor, just like I have every day since he left. Having a ‘good morning’ from him be one of the first things I see is nice and all, but I definitely prefer to actually hear him say it. And not over the phone. Waking up alone in this big ass bed is one of my least favorite parts of the day. It’s like I open my eyes and I’m immediately slapped in the face by the fact that he’s not here. And then I have to quickly remind myself that he will be here again soon(ish). Otherwise my mind starts spiraling downwards with
morbid and pointless thoughts about how every day for the rest of my life would start this way if I ever lost him, or if he ever left me...

If I don’t get my ass out of bed and get our kids fed, clothed and dropped off at school on time, I wouldn’t blame him if he did leave me.

Lucky for me, it’s one of those days when all five of them are in pretty good moods and feeling mostly cooperative. Probably because I don’t care what they do or say or eat (or wear) as long as they stay on schedule. Asta is going to be sporting striped leggings under a polka dot dress with a tutu over the top to pre-school today, and for once I’m letting it happen. I just don’t have it in me to care if she looks batshit crazy.

Another thing I hate about Taylor being gone is that I have to do the school pick up and drop off every day. It’s not that I resent taking our kids to school; I’m not a complete asshole. But it means I have to drive the fucking minivan, which I usually avoid at all costs. As unappealing tasks go, it’s right up there with interacting with the parents of other kids at the school. Most of them are older than me, because they didn’t start procreating in their teens (or marry someone who did). I stick out like a sore thumb.

More like an infected thumb that they want to amputate before whatever it is I’m infected with starts spreading.

Taylor insists it’s all in my head, but that’s because he’s their damn God. He’s the youngest dad on the playground, and arguably the hottest. He’s attentive to not only his own kids, but to any kid that comes up to him. He’s charming and patient with the overly-friendly moms, while at the same time being completely non-threatening to the dads, because even though they know he’s gay, he doesn’t come across as “too gay”. He has shampoo ad hair, and no visible tattoos, and he can pull off wearing fucking pastels. The same cannot be said for me, and I swear they all look down on me because of it. They do that disdainful head-to-toe eye sweep every morning. It’s like they’re checking to see if I’ve morphed into a more PTA acceptable version of myself overnight, and they’re disgusted to find that I haven’t. None of them talk to me, and after saying “good morning” to a few of them and getting nothing but forced smiles in response, I stopped trying to talk to them, too.

Who fucking needs ‘em?

Despite being on time dropping the kids off, I still have to break several speed limits on the way to pick my mom up because the damn freeway was so backed up. But as Taylor often points out to me when I accuse him of driving too fast, speed limits are more like suggestions than an actual limits…
“Sorry I’m late.” I sigh as soon as mom opens the front door. “Traffic was shit.”

“I think you mean ‘bad’.” She corrects me, grabbing her purse and jacket before shooing me off of the porch so that she can close and lock the door behind her. “Traffic was bad.”

“No, it was shit. If it was just bad, I would’ve been here a lot sooner.”

With a defeated shake of her head, she makes her way over to the car. “I give up. If twenty years of me telling you to cut out the cussing hasn’t made any difference, nothing will. I guess I’m just going to have to learn to live with it.”

“You say it, but you don’t mean it.”

“I’m fighting a big enough battle right now, I don’t have the time or energy to fight any others.”

Cussing comes as naturally to me as reprimanding me for my cussing comes to her. If I can’t stop myself from slipping the words ‘fuck’ and ‘shit’ into every other sentence that leaves my mouth, I doubt she’s going to be able to bite her tongue and resist chastising me. Besides, it probably wouldn’t be as much fun for me if it didn’t piss her off so much.

The drive over to the hospital takes about fifteen minutes. I hate how familiar it all is now. You’d think it would make it easier or something, but it doesn’t. It doesn’t matter whether I know where the best parking spots are, or how to get to Oncology without looking at a single sign, or how cheerfully the nurses greet us by name when we check in for mom’s appointments. Nothing makes this any less shitty than it was the first day, and I doubt anything will.

Nothing short of us going into her doctor’s office and having him tell us that there’s no sign of the cancer anywhere in her body, and she doesn’t need to have any more chemo.

But that’s not likely to happen.

Best case scenario, he’ll tell us that the tumors they couldn’t remove with surgery are shrinking faster than they hoped, and they’re one hundred percent confident that she won’t need any more chemo or treatments of any kind once she’s through with the current round.
“Dia?” Doctor Mendez, mom’s oncologist, smiles warmly as he steps into the waiting room. “Come on back.”

“That was fast.” She chuckles, and from that one brief sound I can hear how nervous she is. “I barely had time to sit down.”

“Well, somehow we’ve actually been running on schedule for all of our appointments so far today. It’s like some kind of miracle!”

“I’m sure miracles of any kind are more than welcome around here.” Mom smiles faintly as she stands from her chair.

I wasn’t expecting her to want me in the room with her while she gets her test results, despite the fact that I’ve been in the room for every last one of her chemo treatments. But when she looks down at me, I can tell without her having to ask that she wants me to join them. I get out of my seat immediately, even though part of me wants to grab onto it and refuse to go anywhere. I feel as though I’m the one getting test results, not her. But I guess those results will impact me, one way or another, so it’s not an entirely irrational feeling.

We follow her doctor out of the waiting room and past a couple of closed doors in a short hallway. He stops in front of the first open one we come to, standing aside and gesturing for us to go in ahead of him. For a moment, I feel as though I’m being tricked. Like he’s not actually going to follow us inside, he’s just going to close the door after us and lock us in here.

Which is a totally fucking stupid thought for me to have.

Luckily I’m used to having totally fucking stupid thoughts. They probably make up at least half of the thoughts I have on a day to day basis, and it’s mostly easy for me to dismiss them.

“How are you feeling today?” Doctor Mendez asks mom as he takes his seat behind his desk and watches the two of us get as comfortable as possible in the chairs opposite him.

“Um… good.” She replies, almost as though she’s guessing at the correct answer. “A little tired, but that’s pretty much the norm these days.”
He nods understandingly, offering her a sympathetic smile. “Any nausea or weakness?”

“A little weakness, I suppose. Not much nausea today, but I don’t tend to have any on non-chemo days.”

“Right.” After a short pause, he takes a deep breath and looks down at the file on the desk in front of him. I’m guessing it’s all of my mom’s information and test results from the day she was referred here up until yesterday, and I instinctively squirm as he opens it and flips through some papers until he finds whatever it is he’s looking for. “I have the results of the tests we ran yesterday, and…” Shit. No one pauses in the middle of a damn sentence like that unless the don’t want to fucking finish it. “Those levels that we’ve been keeping an eye on and hoping to see drop these past few weeks are still climbing, which is why I ordered a scan, just to see where we stand. The scan confirmed what I suspected, which is that the chemotherapy isn’t having the effect on the cancer that we’d hoped. Unfortunately this kind of thing happens sometimes; certain patients don’t respond to certain treatments, and we have to try a new approach.”

“What does that mean?” She asks nervously. “Will I need to have radiation instead?”

“No, not yet. It’s still an option further down the line, but there are different combinations of chemotherapy drugs, and I’d like to start you on one of those first and see how we do.”

“Oh… okay. If… if you think that’s the best option-“

“So you’re saying that you’ve basically been torturing her for the last six weeks and it hasn’t helped?” I snap impatiently. “At all?!”

“I know how frustrating this must be-“

“I doubt it.”

“Tommy, sweetheart, it’s-“

“No, it’s not okay.” I cut her off before she can even try to mollify me. I hate arguing with her, and I hate how bratty I probably seem to both of them right now. But I’m not bratty, I’m fucking
indignant! It’s not my fault those two things sound the same coming out of my mouth. “What happens if the next type of chemo doesn’t work, either? Another month of her feeling like shit and then we move on to something worse? And what about the fucking cancer? Are the tumors any smaller now?”

“I’m afraid not.” He replies apologetically. “This is a very aggressive type of cancer, and we knew from the start that it was going to put up a fight. But just because we haven’t gained as much ground as we’d hoped to so far, that doesn’t mean that the cancer is going to win this battle. It just means that we have to rethink our approach and come up with a new plan of attack.”

“When do I start on the new kind of chemotherapy?” Asks mom, tired but somehow still strong. I don’t know how she does it. I mostly just wanna trash this too-tidy office, and she’s sitting here all poised!

“I have you scheduled for tomorrow. I wish I could give you a break, I know it’s been hard, but...”

“I understand.” She smiles weakly. “Miles to go before we sleep and all of that.”

“Exactly.”

Apparently my brain can’t stand to listen to any more of this bullshit. It completely tunes out the rest of their conversation, which hopefully didn’t include any important information that I needed to know. It’s selfish of me to just shut down like this, and I’m totally aware of that fact. But I think it’d be even more selfish of me to continue bitching Doctor Mendez out the way I was a few minutes ago. I know it’s not what mom needs me to be doing right now.

Not that me sitting here, seething silently and scowling at Doctor Mendez’s desk is any more helpful to her.

I’m a shining example of how not to act when accompanying a loved one to an appointment with their Oncologist.

I’m not sure how much longer they continue discussing her future treatment plan, or whatever the fuck it is they’re talking about. I just know that when he hands her some paperwork and stands up to show us out, I can’t get out of my chair fast enough. I want to get the hell out of this place, I’ve seen way too much of it for one lifetime, and so far my experiences here haven’t been all that positive. I tolerated it when I thought that every second I spent here was helping her get better, when every
minute I spent sitting beside her while she got chemo was worth it. And now they’re saying it was all for nothing?

Like we have any time to waste on trial and error treatments!

“I know you’re upset.” Mom begins gently as we get into the car. “But the doctor’s are doing everything they can.”

“How are you so fucking calm about this?” I notice her flinch as I cuss, but true to her word, she doesn’t tell me off for doing it. “He told you that they spent the last month making you feel like shit and it was for nothing, and you reacted like he told you that you were gonna have to settle for vanilla ice cream ‘cause he was all out of chocolate! Aren’t you even a little pissed off?”

“It wouldn’t change anything if I was.”

“So? That doesn’t mean you can’t be angry about this!”

“I know it doesn’t. And of course I’m disappointed and frustrated. But just like with you and your cussing, I can’t afford to waste what little energy I have on things I can’t change. I could get upset about this, but nothing will be any different at the end of the day as a result.”

It’s not like I don’t get what she’s saying. It makes complete sense. But someone in her situation isn’t supposed to make complete sense, not after being told something like this. They’re not supposed to think logically and rationally, they’re supposed to be furious and cursing God!

But then, I’m doing enough of that for the both of us.

I keep my mouth shut for the entire drive back to mom’s house. I don’t want to make anything any harder on her than it already is with my ranting and moping. Besides, the more I talk about it, the angrier I get. It’s not like I can keep it off of my mind by not mentioning it, but at least mom can’t hear the outraged voice in my head.

“Do you want me to come in for a while?” I sigh as I pull the car over outside her house. “I can make you some lunch.”
“I don’t want to take up your whole day.”

At this point, I feel like I roll my eyes because of stupid shit she says to me about as often as I blink. “You’re *not* taking up my whole day, and it’s not like I had anything planned anyway.”

“You should do something to take your mind off of things for a while.” She suggests, leaning across the hand brake to kiss me on the cheek. “Don’t worry about me, I think I’m probably just going to take a nap.”

“Fine.” I concede grudgingly. “But make sure you have something to eat, too.”

“I will if I’m hungry.”

I watch her open the car door, biting my tongue to keep myself from pointing out that she’s hardly ever hungry anymore, but that’s no reason for her not to eat. She’s definitely losing weight. Between the nausea and the loss of appetite that the chemo has been causing, it’s pretty much impossible for her to avoid it. And I know it’s hard for her to make herself eat when the thought of food makes her want to throw up, or when eating makes her actually throw up.

That doesn’t mean I don’t wanna hold her down and force feed her cake or something.

“I’ll see you tomorrow?” She asks hopefully, like she thinks I might skip her chemo appointment for no fucking good reason.

“Yeah, I’ll pick you up around ten.”

“Thanks, sweetheart. Try to have a good day, okay?”

Fat chance. “Sure.”

I wasn’t lying when I said I had no plans for the rest of my day. I guess I could go to the grocery store and get something for dinner, or do some laundry, or take Duke for a walk, or even try to work on some music. But I don’t want to. I have zero motivation to do anything productive, and even less desire to do something creative. All I really want to do right now is break things and scream
obscenities. But in the end I’ll be left cleaning up whatever I broke, and I probably won’t feel any better.

And my mom won’t be any less sick.

So what’s the fucking point?

I hate that question, there’s never a good answer, but I can’t help asking it. Every time I think I’ve figured it out, something happens that leaves me questioning everything all over again. It’s this endless, hopeless, pointless circle.

Kinda like life.
Chapter 49

Something is... off.

I’ve been gone for two weeks, which is nothing in the grand scheme of things, but somehow something changed while I was away. I just... don’t know what. And apparently no one else seems to see it or feel it. I keep asking them if something was moved in this room, or if there’s something new in that room, but according to them everything is exactly where it was when I left. No additions, or subtractions, or relocations. No haircuts, no new piercings, and no new tattoos.

So why do I feel like this?

Maybe it’s all in my head. A lot of things happen in there that don’t happen in reality. Perhaps just I expected something to be different, so now I’ve convinced myself that it is? Or maybe I expected it to be exactly the way it was when I left, and so any slight, seemingly insignificant change feels bigger to me than it does to anyone else?

It’s kinda hard to put my finger on it when I only have a few days here to figure it out before tour starts. My kids have missed me so much (and vice versa) that at least one of them is at my side and demanding my attention almost constantly from the moment I wake up until the moment they go to bed.

And then Tommy starts demanding my attention.
Repeatedly.

Not that I’m complaining.

“If I didn’t miss you so fucking much when you’re not here, I’d suggest you go away for extended periods of time more often.” He declares breathlessly as I carefully shift my body off of his before collapsing in a useless, sated heap at his side. “’Cause I’m really loving this whole making-up-for-lost-time sex thing. Like a lot.”

“I noticed.”

“I wish I was a woman.”

Of all the things I thought he might say to me in this moment, that wasn’t on the list. “Excuse me?”

“If I was a woman, I’d could probably go again already!” He informs me plainly while I struggle to catch my breath from laughing so hard. “But I’m not, so I have lie here and wait for my junk to recharge, like it’s battery powered or something. It’s fucking bullshit.”

“You know, not all women can hop right back on and go another round.” I explain through residual chuckles. “And I kinda like you just the way you are; male anatomy and all. Besides, I don’t know if I have the energy to go again.”

“Lazy motherfucker.”

“I’m sorry, but there’s nothing left of me! You took it all. I am the dictionary definition of spent!”

“Fine, you can just lie there and take it then, ‘cause I’m not done... spending. Or whatever.” I would ask what’s gotten into him, but I know I’ll only get a sexually suggestive response. And I’m too busy cracking up over his sassy attitude to say anything anyway. “I have two weeks worth or orgasm I owe yous to cash in, and I’m not wasting a single one!”

“I don’t recall writing any I owe yous...”
“I did it for you.” He informs me proudly, tapping the side of his head with his index finger. “Every time I felt like fucking you and I couldn’t, I made a mental note.”

“So how many more orgasms do you feel you’re still owed at this point?”

“Hmm…” I have to bite my lip to stop myself from laughing out loud as his brow furrows in feigned focus while he counts off on his fingers the number of orgasms he’s had so far since I’ve been home. “Like five and a half.”

“How do I owe you half an orgasm?! Did you only half want to have sex with me or something?”

“Remember yesterday morning, in the shower? I only counted that as a half.”

“Why? You got off! I was there, I know you weren’t faking!”

“No, I wasn’t. But I didn’t feel like you were really giving it your all, you know? You cut a few corners, missed a few spots…”

Asshole. “Uh huh.”

“I’m only saying this because I love you and I wanna see you reach your full potential.” He smirks at me wickedly, and I can tell from the look in his eyes that he’s fully expecting, hoping, that I’ll climb back on top of him and show him just how much fucking potential (pun intended) I have!

And because I’m an overachieving perfectionist who likes to exceed expectations, that’s exactly what I do (and then some).

I’ve said it before, and I’ll say it again: I love sex.

Sex is amazing.
Well, good sex is amazing. And the kind of sex Tommy and I have rarely rates as merely “good” on a scale of “meh” to “mind blowing”. I’m not sure there’s a way to accurately describe just how amazing it really is. It’s like getting high on the best drugs money can buy. I would imagine. I’ve never actually done any hard drugs, so I can’t speak from personal experience.

The thing is, there aren’t only positive similarities between drugs and sex. Obviously something about getting high is addictive. And something about sex is addictive, too, otherwise there wouldn’t be sex addicts. Typically addicts have one thing in common, regardless of what they’re addicted to. They’re numbing something, trying to escape from thoughts or feelings that won’t stop plaguing them when they’re ‘sober’. That’s what drugs, and alcohol, and sex can do for you. They obliterate your problems, even if only for a moment. They wipe every coherent thought from your mind, like putting all of those negative, anxious, self-loathing voices in your head on mute. You float in a safe little bubble where nothing can hurt you, and everything feels perfect.

But bubbles burst, usually way too fast. And nothing is ever any different when you come down than it was before you got high. Which is what makes you want to do it again, and again, and again. To obliterate and mute and escape it all, over, and over, and over...

As I lie beside Tommy, watching him sleep so deeply that I have to resist the urge to check and see if he’s still breathing, I realize that he is the cause of that nagging feeling I’ve been having. And I realize why it took me so long to figure it out.

It’s because he didn’t want me to.

He’s been using sex to escape, and he’s been doing his best to distract me from that fact, to blind me to it. He labeled it as ‘making-up-for-lost-time’ sex, and I didn’t question it. I’ve missed him, and I wanted him just as much as he wanted me. But he’s not trying to make up for lost time, not really. He’s trying to avoid having any kind of meaningful conversation with me, or giving me enough time alone with him, without us having sex, for me to see that something is wrong. It’s exactly what he did when he was too afraid to discuss the idea of having a baby after we got back from Tulsa this summer, and when he found out Dia was sick and he didn’t want to deal with it.

I’m just not sure what it is he’s trying to hide from this time, and I really don’t know why he’s still trying to hide anything from me.

I thought we talked about this already, I thought we were past this.

I have no idea how I’m supposed to handle this situation now that I’m finally aware of it. Tomorrow is my last full day at home before I leave on tour, and I really don’t want to risk pissing him off.
before I go. Being apart is hard enough on us both without throwing in a fight to make it worse. And we’re having Shauntae, Sam and Dia over for brunch tomorrow morning. It’s kind of a big deal, what with Shauntae carrying Dia’s grandchild and them never having met before. I definitely don’t want to do anything that would put Tommy in a crappy mood and ruin the whole thing. He’s not exactly a people person when he’s mad, not even with people he’s not mad at.

But I don’t know how I can just let this go and pretend that nothing is wrong.

By the time I fall asleep, I still haven’t figured out what the hell I’m supposed to do. And by the time I wake up, it’s pretty close to being the last thing on my mind. That probably sounds bad… but you try keeping a coherent thought in your head after waking up to a gorgeous guy kissing the inside of your thigh! He’s already got me breathless and hard, and I’m not even fully conscious yet. It’s not the first time I’ve ever been woken up this way, but it’s the first time I’ve ever seriously considered telling him to stop.

“Good morning.” He murmurs against my leg when he feels me squirm, his eyes darting up to meet mine for just a second as his teeth nip playfully at my skin. “Sleep well?”

“Not as well as I woke up.” I tell him with a soft, uncertain chuckle, propping myself up on my elbows to get a better view of what he’s doing. Which was a bad idea, because it only turns me on even more. “H-how about you?”

“Hmm?”

“Did you slee- fuck!” My eyes slam shut as I grasp handfuls of the bed sheets, trying to regain my composure enough to continue speaking. It’s no easy task when his tongue is teasing its way higher and higher by the second. “Sleep well?”

Apparently I’m not going to get a response to that question, because his mouth is a little too preoccupied…

_Damnit_ , why does he have to be so good at this?!

“Tommy?”

“Hmm?”
“C-could you just…”

Slow down? Stop for a minute? Talk to me? Any of those options would work.

On the other hand, if I stop him now and basically accuse him of keeping something from me, he’s going to be ten times more annoyed at me than he would be if I just let him finish first. I swear this is not some lame excuse I came up with so that I can still get laid. It’s science! If he gets off, hopefully he’ll be a hell of a lot calmer, and therefore a hell of a lot less likely to rip my head off. Or worse, give me the silent treatment for the rest of the day.

“Could I just…” He asks curiously, getting way too much enjoyment out of the unsatisfied sound I automatically make as soon as his lips leave my body.

“Nothing.” I tell him with a dismissive shake of my head. “Just… keep doing what you’re doing.”

He holds my pleading stare for a second or two, just long enough for me to catch a glimpse of the devilish little smile that appears on his face before he eagerly resumes his previous endeavor.

Once he’s cashed in another of his ‘orgasm I owe yous’, and our legs feel a little less like jello, we stumble our way into a shower. I’m half expecting him to jump on me again, but for now he seems content to just enjoy the sensation of the hot water and my hands on his body as I massage some shower gel onto his skin. With his eyes closed, and his body practically propped up against mine, he looks so peaceful. So calm.

I really hate to potentially ruin the moment, but I also don’t want to waste this opportunity.

“Tommy?”

He sighs happily, his head rolling back against my chest. “Yeah?”

I wish I had any idea how I was supposed to start, but I haven’t really had a chance to come up with a subtle, non-accusatory way of asking him what it is he’s been using all of this sex to escape from.
“Is everything okay?”

“Well, it’s seven o’clock in the morning. I’ve already gotten off, and now a hot guy is lathering me up in the shower, so… what do you think?”

“I mean in general, not right at this moment.”

“I’m fine.” He shrugs like there’s nothing more to say and he doesn’t even know why I asked. But the fact that he steps away from me is definitely telling. “Why?”

“I just wanted to make sure. I know holding down the fort here while I was gone was exhausting-”

“It wasn’t so bad.”

“Okay… but I know you probably wouldn’t have told me if you were having a rough day because you didn’t want to worry me, and you didn’t want me to feel guilty for not being here.”

“There wasn’t anything to tell.” He continues to insist, taking yet another step away from me and busying himself with washing his hair. “Everything was fine. My days were no rougher than usual.”

“You can tell me if something happens when I’m gone, you know that, right?” I ask, placing my hands on his shoulders and turning him to face me. “I’m here, even if I’m not here.” When he nods, he does so without looking me in the eyes. It doesn’t exactly reassure me that he believes what I’ve just said. “You can call me any time-”

“How about next Thursday night?” He proposes with a sassy smile that’s probably intended to hide the skepticism in his tone. “Say around… nine o’clock?”

“Fine, so there’s two hours a day when I’ll be unable to answer your calls. But you can still call me, and I’ll call you back the second I leave that stage. If you need me, I-”

“You know what I really need from you?”
I could take a wild guess. “What?”

He reaches up and takes one of my hands from his shoulder, then picks up the bottle of shower gel and squeezes a generous helping into my palm. Without a word he places my hand to his chest, slowly guiding it lower in lazy circles and leaving a trail of bubbles behind.

“I’m still all dirty from the waist down…”

“Tommy-”

“I can do it myself, if you’re not interested.”

I could call his bluff and leave the room, or I could keep pressing him to talk to me even though he’s clearly not going to. Or I can do the one thing that won’t put him in a shitty mood mere hours before his mother and the woman carrying our unborn child come over for a nice getting-to-know you brunch.

Our longer than expected shower leaves me with less time than I’d originally budgeted to get the kids up and dressed, and to start prepping the various dishes I planned on making. Tommy probably thinks that telling me not to make so much food is a helpful suggestion. It’s like he doesn’t know me at all! You don’t invite people over for brunch and only offer them the basics, that’s just rude. Brunch is breakfast and lunch combined, and should therefore consist of an appropriate number and variety of food options!

When I tell him as much, he rolls his eyes at me, steals one of the strawberries I’m slicing up for my fruit kabobs, and then he leaves to pick his mom up.

Since it’s such a nice day (there’s rarely anything else in Southern California), I decide to set everything up out on the patio, and I text Shaunte to suggest that she, Sam and Stella bring their swimsuits in case they feel like taking a dip in the pool. Despite my frantic rushing around the kitchen in what probably looks like pointless circles, I’m actually really excited about this morning. It’s one more step we’re taking on this surrogacy journey, one step closer. And there’s really no stress involved in this encounter; no one needs to impress or be impressed. The kids are already comfortable with Shaunte and her family, and Dia already loves Shaunte simply because of what she’s doing for us. There’s absolutely no reason why they won’t get along.

The sun is shining, the kitchen smells like bacon and coffee, the gleeful sounds of my kids play outside are drifting in through the open door of the kitchen terrace…
And Tommy’s down to three and a half orgasm I owe you’s as of a couple of hours ago, so he’s got nothing to complain about!

What could possibly go wrong?

Shit, forget I said that.

Shauntae and Sam arrive before Tommy gets back from picking Dia up, and Stella drags Sam straight out to the pool to join the rest of the kids. Shauntae seemed tempted to join them, but the lure of the kitchen was just a little too strong. Besides which, she and I haven’t spoken outside of text messages for just over two weeks now, and it’s nice to have a little time to catch up.

“Mmm… bacon.” She exhales longingly after taking in the sight and smell of the mountain of cooked meat sitting on the counter. “This is all for me, yes?”

“Sure, if you want to be the least popular person at this little party.” I chuckle softly, pouring some batter into the waffle iron. “But if you wanna steal a few pieces before brunch officially starts, I won’t tell anyone.”

“You’re a saint.”

“I would never deny a fellow bacon addict.”

“Too bad I can’t wash it down with a decent cup of coffee.” She heaves a wistful sigh as she gazes at the almost overflowing pot in front of her.

“It’s decaf.” I tell her in a hushed voice, as though it’s some big secret. “I read online that you’re allowed to have a couple of cups of decaf a day when you’re pregnant.”

“You didn’t have to make fake coffee just for me!”

“It’s no big deal. I already filled up on regular before everyone got here. Tommy can’t tell the
difference between regular and decaf—"

“Neither can Sam! I don’t know how people live like that.”

“I know, right? And I guess Dia’s not drinking caffeine right now because it makes the nausea she gets from chemo worse. As if it could get any worse.”

“Ugh. Poor thing.”

“Yeah…”

“I know how she feels, though. About the nausea, not the chemo. I can’t even imagine how horrible that must be…”

As if on cue, I hear the front door open and the sound of Tommy carelessly tossing his keys into a bowl on the hall table. If he’s feeling cheerful, he’ll often call out something silly, like “honey, I’m home!” But apparently he’s not in a whimsical mood right now, because he doesn’t so much as announce that he’s back before he and Dia walk into the kitchen.

For a moment, I can’t even move.

It’s only been a few weeks since I last saw Dia, but in that relatively short amount of time her appearance has changed. Even with makeup on, I can see that she’s paler than usual. Her face is a little thinner, too. In fact, all of her is. Every time I’ve seen her since she started losing her hair, she’s been wearing a scarf to cover her head and hide her hair loss, but today she’s wearing a wig. The color closely matches her usual hair color, but even if I didn’t know it wasn’t real, I think I’d still be able to tell.

“I don’t look that bad, do I?” She teases, leaving me blushing with shame over the fact that I haven’t said a word since she set foot in the room.

“No!” I assure her quickly. “God, no. I was just… admiring your new ‘do.”

Thankfully she seems more amused than offended by my blatant staring, and she opens her arms for
a hug as she makes her way over to me. “You’re very sweet, but you’re a horrible liar.”

“I’m not lying!”

“I’m having a bad hair day.” She continues to insist while I gingerly wrap my arms around her. It’s like I’m afraid to hug her too tightly incase it somehow hurts her, but hugging her tightly is still my main instinct right now. “I can’t seem to stop it from doing this seventies flippy thing that makes me look like a sixty year old Charlie’s Angel wannabe.”

“Well, I think you look great.”

“Thank you, honey.” She smiles, kissing me on the cheek as she lets me go. “It’s good to have you home, even if it is only for a few days.”

“It’s good to be back. I wish I didn’t have to leave again so soon, but-”

“Mom, this is Shauntae.” Tommy interrupts us, though I can’t tell if he meant to or if he just wasn’t paying close enough attention to our conversation to realize it wasn’t quite over. “She’s our surrogate.”

“I know that.” Dia laughs softly, turning to Shauntae. “Hi, I’m Dia.”

“It’s nice to meet yo… oh!” Shauntae’s greeting is cut short as Dia wraps her in a grateful hug. Judging by the outstretched hand Shauntae had been offering her, I think it’s safe to assume she was only expecting a handshake. “Hi!”

“I’m sorry, is this too much?” Asks Dia, still not letting her go.

“No, this is totally fine.” Shauntae chuckles, gladly returning the embrace. “It’s great to finally meet you.”

“I’ve heard so many wonderful things about you and your family.” She releases her hold on Shauntae just enough to take a step back and look her in the eyes. “And with everything you’re doing for our family… I’m just so, so glad to finally meet you.”
“Let her go, mom. You’re smothering the embryo.” Tommy remarks playfully, earning himself an eye roll from Dia and a towel swat from me. “Ow!”

“Why don’t you make yourself useful and take your mom and Shauntae downstairs?” I suggest, giving him a gentle nudge towards the dining room while he scowls at me in exaggerated disapproval. “Sam is out by the pool with the kids.”

“Is that a request or an order?” He asks cheekily, so I give him a ‘what do you think?’ eyebrow raise in response.

“Here, take these with you.” I add, handing him a plate piled high with croissants.

“Sir, yes sir!”

He’ll pay for that later.

Which is probably why he said it.

When I finally finish cooking and carrying everything down to the patio, I take a moment to appreciate the sight of everyone enjoying the mid-morning sunshine. The boys are still playing in the pool, while the girls sit along the side, wrapped in towels and trying not to get splashed. Tommy is sitting with his mom, who is happily chatting away with Sam and Shauntae. She seems happier than I think I’ve seen her since she told us about her diagnosis.

I watch them all, taking in their smiles and the sound of their laughter, and I try to commit it all to memory so that I can take it with me when I leave tomorrow.

Just as I’d hoped, everything goes more than smoothly. The kids don’t bicker, Dia, Shauntae and Sam get along famously, and there isn’t a crumb of food leftover once every one is done eating.

Okay, maybe that last part isn’t a positive; leftovers are never a bad thing in my book.
Despite the multiple offers of help I receive when I start collecting up everyone’s plates to take inside, I insist that I can do it myself and that they all relax. It takes some convincing, but eventually they all agree to let me handle it. It’s not like I’m planning on washing the dishes, or even rinsing them off. I just want them out of the way so that I can pretend I already washed them.

I’ve just finished carrying the last precarious looking stack of cups up from the patio when I hear the sound of someone coming into the kitchen behind me (squeaky floorboards are only good for only one thing). But just because I’m not surprised by the presence of another person, that doesn’t mean I’m not surprised by who that person is.

“Hey, what’re you doing up here?” I ask Dia, noting how tired she looks just from climbing two flights of stairs.

“I needed some water.”

“And Tommy let you come and get it yourself?”

She smiles faintly, stepping further into the room and glancing towards the kitchen terrace. “He was busy with Asta, I didn’t want to bother him. Besides, I can still do things for myself, whether he believes it or not. I may be sick, but that doesn’t mean I’m suddenly incapable of taking care of myself.”

“That’s not what he thinks.” I tell her gently. “He’s just worried about you.”

“I worry about him, too. Especially lately.”

“I know the feeling. I hate that I can’t be here to help out. He says it’s no big deal, but I can tell he’s exhausted.”

“Because he won’t let anyone help. He won’t even admit that he needs help.” She concurs disappointedly. “Getting him to talk about how he’s feeling is like pulling teeth. But whether he’ll talk about it or not, I know he’s still upset about those test results. He took it so hard-”

“Which test results?” I frown uncertainly.
“The ones I got last week.” She reminds me. Except she’s not reminding me, because in order for her to do that I would’ve had to fucking know about them in first place. “Didn’t he tell you?”

“Uh… no. No, he didn’t.”

“Oh.”

“I guess it slipped his mind.” I don’t want her to see how pissed off I am, so I turn back to the sink and begin running water onto the stack of dirty plates. “So, um… what were the tests for? I mean… did something happen?”

“No, they were just some routine tests to see how the tumors were reacting to the chemotherapy.” She explains wearily, and I immediately feel bad for even asking. Of course I want to know, and I would have prefered to hear it from my husband. But apparently he’s even less eager to talk about it than she is. “It wasn’t good news. It doesn’t look like the last round of chemotherapy made much difference at all.”

Fuck.

“I’m so sorry, Dia.” I sigh sadly, turning the water back off and giving her my full attention. “That’s…”

“Disappointing.”

“Not the word I was going for, but… yeah.”

She nods in agreement, exhaling a soft, sad chuckle as she leans against the kitchen counter beside me. “Tommy was… well, to say he was furious would be an understatement.”

“Yeah…” I can only imagine how upset he was. I just don’t understand why he hid all of this from me. “So what happens now? Do you have to have more surgery?”

“No. At least, not yet. For now they’re just changing the type of chemotherapy I’m getting, and hoping that the tumors actually respond this time.”
I guess that’s good news. Or better news than it could have been. Nothing about this is good, it’s just varying levels of shitty. “Is there anything I can do?”

“You’re doing it already. I don’t even want to think about how Tommy would be handling all of this if he didn’t have you.”

“Well, apparently he’s not keeping me in the loop about what’s happening anymore, let alone telling me how he feels about it. So I guess he can handle it just fine by himself.”

“I’m sure he didn’t tell you because he didn’t want to worry you.” She reassures me confidently, placing a comforting hand on my arm and giving it a gentle squeeze. “He knows how guilty you already feel about being gone while all of this is happening, he didn’t want to make you feel worse. You give him so much strength, Taylor. He may not know how to talk about all of this sometimes, but it’s not because of anything you did or didn’t do.”

“Yeah… I’m sure you’re right.”

That’s a lie. But it’s not like I can tell her the truth, is it?

She doesn’t need to know that my only contribution to the situation has basically been to fuck the frustration out of him.

Hell, I wish I didn’t know that.
It’s crazy to think that I’ve spent more than half of my life as a touring musician. I was fifteen years old the first time I set foot on a tour bus. I remember feeling at home instantly. No, living off of a bus isn’t exactly glamorous, and when you’re traveling with as many people as we always used to, it’s even more cramped than most people would imagine. But for me it was literally a dream come true. I’d spent the previous year traveling all over the world, staying in four and five star hotels in places like London, Paris, Tokyo and Sydney. It was an incredible, crazy, whirlwind experience. And yet, I was still more excited to get on that bus and spend the summer driving across America, playing shows every few days in stadiums, arenas and amphitheaters.

That was what we had worked so hard for.

Not the money, or the fame, or the five star luxury. But the opportunity to play our music for as many people as possible, as often as possible.

It was everything.

That first tour was the only one where we played at such large venues. Since then it has mostly been theaters and clubs, with the odd state fair thrown in every now and again. Some people probably view that as a step down, a sign of waning success. But I figure we must be doing something right, because here we are, almost twenty years after our first major label debut, and we’re still touring on a pretty regular basis, and recording new music, and making enough money to support three decently sized families. Not to mention the people we employ to help run our record label. We’re just famous enough to make a very comfortable living doing what we love, but not famous enough for the
paparazzi to be up our asses twenty-four seven.

If you ask me, that’s a pretty perfect position to be in.

I just don’t remember it ever being this hard for me to keep myself occupied on the road before. There was always something to do. When I was a kid, that something was usually writing a new song, or doing some form of art, or playing video games with Zac. As an adult, it was more frequently record label related work, or helping Natalie with the kids whenever they accompanied us on tour. I usually preferred it when they didn’t. Not because I didn’t want to be with my kids, but because it was so much harder to be myself when Natalie was around.

The last few years I’ve gotten used to having the kids on the road with me the entire time we’re out on tour. And Tommy. I’ve gotten used to feeling like myself with them here rather than without.

But now they’re not here.

I’m sure there’s plenty of things I could be doing with any free time I have between radio interviews, sound checks, meet & greets and concerts. I just don’t seem to want to do any of it. Instead, I spend all of my time missing Tommy and the kids, and worrying about all of the things that could be going on back home that I won’t know about if he continues lying to me.

Or withholding information.

I tried one more time to get him to open up to me before I left on tour. I didn’t want to push him, because that never leads to anything good. The last time I tried to force him to talk to me when he didn’t want to, he walked out on me and I didn’t see or hear from him for hours. I didn’t have time to go through that all over again. It’s not like I thought he’d disappear on me and not show up again before I left town, but I wasn’t sure we’d be on the best of terms by the time I boarded the plane. Neither of us needed that weighing on us all week.

But my last ditch attempt at coaxing the truth out of him didn’t yield any results. He brushed me off again, just like he did in the shower that morning, telling me he was fine and that nothing was bothering him. Luckily Dia had already agreed to text me with any future test results or other news she thought I should know about, so at least I’ll be kept informed by someone in the Ratliff family from now on. I just wish it was the same person who vowed to be honest with me, for better or for worse.
Then again, I’m not really one to talk when it comes to keeping marriage vows. I broke mine repeatedly for almost a decade, so I guess I should cut him some slack.

My first two days at home after the tour kicked off were very similar to the handful of days I had off after rehearsals. When I wasn’t spending time with the kids (which was pretty much only when they were asleep), Tommy was all over me, “making up for lost time”. But he seemed genuinely happy, for the first time in weeks, and I just wanted to let him hold onto that feeling. He was still on a high from attending our baby’s six week ultrasound appointment a few days earlier. I was totally bummed out about not being able to be there in person, but he was able to Facetime with me and point the phone at the computer screen during the scan, so that was something, at least. I wish I would have seen his face, though. Not after the fact, as he gushed about how cool it was, but the moment when he first saw the baby. When he saw that barely perceptible flutter of a heartbeat...

At least we were able to arrange the next appointment for one of the days I’ll be home. We’ll get to hear the baby’s heartbeat for the first time, and no way in hell was I going to miss that! We had to push the eight week ultrasound to almost nine weeks to make it happen, but Doctor O’Conner wasn’t at all concerned.

And that’s what I’ve been trying to be all week; not at all concerned. We all know that I’m not very good when it comes to not overthinking things, though.

“Truck stop.”

I look up from my dormant, dark phone screen to see Zac standing in front of me, pulling on his jacket. “Huh?”

“Truck. Stop.” He repeats slowly and clearly, a smirk curling the corner of his mouth. “Were you just sleeping with your eyes open?”

“No, I was trying to forge a psychic connection with Tommy via my phone so that he’ll call me.”

“Like a Jedi mind trick?”

“If that helps you.” I chuckle softly.

“Are you guys coming or not?” Asks Ike as he and Andrew, our bassist, make their way towards the
front of the bus.

“I am. But Tay’s busy flexing his Jedi muscles.”

Ike snorts mockingly, pausing at the open door to look back at us. “How’s that going?”

“The force is not strong with this one.” Zac informs him in exaggerated disappointment.

When my phone suddenly comes to life and starts vibrating in my hand, it surprises us both so much that he actually stumbles backwards and almost falls onto the seat across the aisle from me.

“You were saying?” I tease him, accepting the call and raising the phone to my ear. “Hey!”

“Hey, sorry I’m calling later than I said I would.”

“It’s fine. Everything okay?”

“Yeah.” He sighs deeply, tiredly. “Just had to clean up a bunch of stuff after the kids went to bed.”

“You could’ve had them clean up before they went to bed.” I point out, silently declining Zac’s mimed offer to get me something from the truck stop.

“I know, but sometimes it’s just way less exhausting to do it yourself, you know?”

I definitely know. And it’s not like I can argue with him, because I’ve done the same thing myself countless times. “I’m sorry you have to deal with all that stuff alone.”

“Would you stop? You can’t keep making the same fucking apology every time we talk.”

“Why not?”
“Because it’s starting to get really annoying. And if you don’t stop doing it, I’m going to stop talking to you entirely.”

“Wow… you’re mean.”

“Tough love, baby.” He shoots back unapologetically. “Now shut up and tell me how the show went.”

“How am I supposed to shut up and tell you stuff at the same time?”

“I’m seriously like five seconds from hanging up on you.”

That’s probably an empty threat, but I’m not about to push my luck. “It was fine. It was almost sold out, and all the fans seemed to have a great time. I didn’t see security breaking up any fights tonight, and only one sexually explicit proposal was yelled at me while I was singing about my dead grandmother, so...”

“Your fans are fucking cray.”

“And proud of it, apparently.”

“Did you forget any lyrics tonight?” He teases.

“I got the words to one song slightly wrong, but at least I was still singing something.”

“Impressive.”

“Right? I was pretty proud of myself.” I smile as I get out of my seat and head back towards the bunks. “Besides being messy, how was your day?”

“Fine.” He replies simply, and after giving him a moment to expand on that statement, I realize that
he’s not going to do so without a little gentle prodding.

“What did you do?”

It’s like I can hear him shrug. “The usual.”

“That could include any number of things.” I point out as playfully as I can.

“Nothing worth talking about.”

“Okay…”

“What’re you up to?”

“Nothing, really.” I sigh, resigning myself to the fact that he’s probably not going to fill me in on the details of his day without me pushing him to the point of irritation, which I don’t particularly want to do. “We finished up the show a couple of hours ago, spent some time signing stuff and taking pictures out by the bus with the fans, and then we hit the road. We’re at a truck stop right now, so everyone’s loading up on junk food.”

“What’re you getting?”

“I’m not, I stayed on the bus. I wanted to talk to you.”

“Aw, that’s sweet.” He coos, his tone much lighter than before. “I know how much you love your shitty truck stop food.”

“Yeah, well, I love you more.”

“You’re not gonna get all sappy and gross on me, are you? ‘Cause I’ll hang up on you for that, too.”
“I wouldn’t dare; I know better.”

“So… *everyone* is in the truck stop right now, huh?”

“Yup.”

“Think they’ll be gone for a while?” He asks in a way that automatically causes goosebumps to rise up and down my arms.

“Probably.” I tell him as I hoist myself into my bunk and make myself comfortable.

“Long enough for us to phone fuck?”

Probably not. “Maybe.”

“*Maybe* we should find out?” He suggests seductively.

“Doesn’t that break our ‘hands off’ policy?” I tease, pulling the small curtain across the opening of the bunk and blocking out most of the light from outside. “If we have phone sex while I’m gone, the sex when I get home might not be as hot.”

He scoffs, loudly, and I can’t help laughing at his obvious objection. “Fuck that. We could have phone sex ten times a *day* while you’re gone, it’s not gonna make the sex we have when you’re here any less hot.”

“I dunno…”

“Well *I* do know. And you know what else I know?”

“What’s that?” I ask, already unbuttoning my pants.
“If you don’t stop playing hard to get, you’re gonna have to get off while your brothers and backing band are sitting like ten feet away from you.”

Wouldn’t be the first time.

But that doesn’t mean it’s my preferred way to do it. “Are your pants undone?”

“No.”

“Mine are.” I chastise him playfully. “Should I just start without you, and you can catch up whenever you’re ready, or...?”

“Asshole.”

“You know, your dirty talk could use some work. It’s a little… one note.”

“I’m just getting started.” He retorts smugly. “You ain’t heard nothin’ yet.”

I don’t doubt that.

The problem, if you can even call it that, with having phone sex with Tommy is that he has almost no sense of urgency. Probably because there’s rarely anything happening on his end of the line to provoke him to get there faster. Plus, I’m pretty sure he gets a kick out of knowing that the longer he drags it out, the more likely it is that someone will hear me. He’s kind of evil like that.

I’m vaguely aware of the fact that other people are starting to return to the bus. Aware enough to stifle myself as much as possible (but not so much that Tommy can no longer here me, because that totally defeats the point of having phone sex). All I can do is hope like hell that their chatter and the sound of Zac’s video game is enough to drown out any noises I can’t contain. I can hear Tommy getting more worked up over the fact that I have to stay quiet; like I said, it’s a turn on for him to see (or hear, in this case) me squirm. And hearing him get worked up is always a turn on for me, so it’s not long before I’m stuffing the corner of my pillow into my mouth to mask those last, desperate moans of pleasure.
My mind is a little too foggy to focus on whether or not the sounds outside of my bunk have come to a sudden, suspicious stop, or if anyone is laughing. It’s difficult to care one way or another. But once I’ve come down off of that high, and Tommy and I have said goodnight, the realization that I now have to get out of my bunk to get to the bus bathroom starts to sink in. I briefly contemplate just staying in here, but I know I’ll only regret it in the morning. So I do my best to straighten myself up within the confines of my bunk, and then, with a deep breath, I grab my wash bag, push back the curtain, and climb out into the aisle.

I don’t so much as glance in the direction of the front of the bus to see if anyone is watching me, I just make a beeline for the bathroom door and quickly lock myself inside the cramped little room. After cleaning up and giving my still racing heart a moment to slow down, I spend the next couple of minutes staring at my reflection in the mirror above the tiny sink as I brush my teeth. Suddenly I’m less worried about whether or not my brothers heard me getting off in my bunk, and more concerned by how unwilling Tommy was to share any details of his day with me.

Again.

But I haven’t received any texts or phonecalls from Dia to let me know that something is going on back home that I should be concerned about. So whatever it is he’s not telling me, at least I know it’s nothing to do with his mom’s health.

By the time I leave the bathroom, I don’t even care if I’m subjected to merciless mocking the moment I join everyone else on the front seats of the bus. My mind is too preoccupied with much more serious thoughts.

“Hey.” Zac smirks at me knowingly. “How’d your phone call with Tommy go? You guys have a nice, long… chat.”

Ike quickly nudges him in the side, so hard that Zac almost doubles over and spills his can of Dr. Pepper as he grasps at the spot where Ike’s elbow connected with his ribs.

“If you’re going to poke fun at me, you’d better hope I don’t get mad.” I reply sarcastically, dropping down heavily into the empty spot next to Andrew, our bassist. “Like you never do it.”

“Do what?” He asks in his most innocent voice, receiving another jab from our big brother as a result. “Ow! Dude, touch me again, and I’ll shove this Xbox controller up your ass!”

Dee practically winces at the thought of it. “That thing’s not gonna go in easy…”

“I’m not looking to make it painless for him.”

“Can we please stop talking about shoving things up my ass?”

Andrew laughs quietly as he takes a sip of his water. “The WD-40 has a smart straw, if that makes you feel any better?”

“We really need more women on this bus.” Sighs Bex, trying to hide her own amusement. She’s way too familiar with us to be even slightly fazed by conversations like this one. This is tame in comparison to some of the things she’s heard us say. “How’s everything at home, Tay? And I ask that with absolutely no mocking intended.”

“There’s nothing to mock anyway.” I shrug, pretending that no part of me feels in any way embarrassed by what they may or may not have heard. But I can tell by the looks they’re all shooting back and forth at one another that they probably heard more than enough. “Whatever. It’s not like you guys have never done it.”

“Done what?” Questions Zac in that same sugary sweet tone, glaring at Ike when he notices him draw his arm back in preparation to elbow him again. “Come near me with that thing, and you’ll be playing ‘Call of Duty’ with your colon.”

Sometimes, I swear it’s still nineteen-ninety-eight and we’re still kids. But if that were the case, our mom would have smacked Zac upside the head hard enough when he first threatened to shove a console controller up Ike’s ass that he wouldn’t have done it a second time.

“I was actually taking a genuine interest in your life just now, believe it or not.” Bex smiles at me. “I take it from that look on your face that things aren’t going so well?”

“I don’t know…” How could I know? I’m a thousand miles away from home, and my own husband won’t tell me what’s going on. “Do you guys ever feel like your wives don’t really keep you in the loop while we’re on the road?”
Ike and Zac immediately shake their heads (Zac seems to think the very suggestion of it is hilarious). Andrew and Dee appear to give the question a little more consideration, but eventually they also shake their heads.

“Kate tells me everything.” Zac informs us plainly, making it clear that he’d prefer it if she’d keep some stuff to herself from time to time. “What she ate for breakfast, what the kids ate for breakfast, what she did all day, what the kids did all day…”

“Same.” Nods Ike. “But it’s not like Nikki complains all the time or anything. She tells me the good and the bad. I want to hear how everything’s going, even if it’s not great. I figure the least I can do is give her time to vent if she needs to.”

And I’d be happy to do the same for Tommy. If he would let me.

“What about you guys?” I turn my attention to Andrew and Dee. “Do you feel like your wives keep stuff from you when you’re not there?”

“Not really.” Dee answers carefully. “I mean, maybe sometimes she says stuff’s not a big deal when it obviously is. But she still tells me what’s going on.”

Andrew nods in agreement. “That’s pretty much how it is for me and Janelle.”

“Why?” Asks Ike as he grabs a handful of tortilla chips from the bag beside him. “You think Tommy’s keeping stuff from you?”

“I don’t think he is, I know he is. And he’s been doing it for weeks now.”

“What kind of stuff? Is it important stuff, or just like… one of the kids being difficult and giving him a hard time? ‘Cause if it’s just little stuff, he probably figures it’s not worth mentioning, or he doesn’t want you to feel bad for not being there to take care of stuff.” Andrew points out helpfully.

“Or both.” Adds Dee.

“I wish it was just little stuff. But it feels like he’s not telling me anything right now. I ask how his
day was and all he’ll say is ‘okay’ or ‘fine’. I ask what he did, and he’ll just tell me he did ‘nothing’ or ‘the usual’, or something else to totally avoid giving me an actual answer.”

“Well maybe it is an actual answer to him, you know?” Ike explains sympathetically. “Our days are crazy when we’re on tour, there’s always something going on. But back home it’s like… the same thing everyday. One day bleeds into the next. It’s all chores and errands and bedtime stories. Maybe he figures that saying ‘the usual’ really is enough to fill you in.”

“Oh, but what about the big stuff, like what’s going on with his mom? He’s not telling me about that anymore, either. I had no idea that she’d gotten some bad test results while I was away in Tulsa for rehearsals. Not until she mentioned it to me when I got back to L.A., thinking that Tommy had already told me. I felt like such an idiot for having no clue what was going on when she brought it up.”

“Maybe he just… forgot to tell you?” Offers Zac, his apologetic expression making it obvious that he knows just how pathetic and unlikely that excuse is.

But I still appreciate the effort. “Doubt it. It’s not really something that just slips your mind. I spoke to him the same day she got the test results, and he didn’t even sound like he was upset. He seemed totally normal. And I know there’s no way he was doing fine after something like that, Dia even told me he took it really hard. Which means he was pretending to be okay when he talked to me that night, and he intentionally didn’t tell me what had happened.”

“I’m sure he’s just trying not to worry you while you’re on the road.” Bex reassures me with a comforting pat on the arm. “He knows you already feel guilty for leaving while everything is so stressful for him, and he probably doesn’t want to make it worse for you.”

That’s exactly what I keep trying to tell myself, and exactly what Dia told me. But no matter how many people say it, or how convinced of it they may seem, I’m not convinced. Maybe some part of him is hiding things from me because he thinks he’s doing me a favor, but I don’t believe that his main motivation is to protect me. I don’t know whether he’s withholding information because he doesn’t want to say any of this stuff out loud, or because he thinks that I’ll constantly ask him about it once I know...

But I do know he’s doing it to protect himself.

And it’s not like I don’t completely understand that. But I know he knows better. I know because we’ve been through this before. I can’t count how many times he has kept me at a distance when something was going on that he didn’t want to deal with. And usually we’ll end up fighting about it,
and he’ll push me away even more. But it’s like the further away from me he gets, the more he seems
to realize that he’s only making things harder for himself. So he stops running, and he comes home,
and he lets me in. And we both feel *instantly* better as a result.

But this time it’s taking a hell of a lot longer for that realization to hit him. Maybe because we
haven’t even done the fighting thing yet, so he hasn’t had any reason to push me further away? I
guess I was hoping that me being physically further away from him would have the same effect, but
so far it hasn’t had *any* effect on his behavior at all.

Which probably means I’m going to have to fight with him if I want him to open up to me.

And of course I couldn’t have done it last weekend, or the weekend before that. No, I had to wait
until this weekend. His fucking *birthday*.

Maybe I should wait until next weekend?

And maybe if I keep telling myself that, I can get through the rest of this damn tour without
confronting him about any of this.
Two whole weeks of tour down, four more to go.

It’s weird to be counting down the days until the end of tour without feeling a sense of dread as the time ticks away. I don’t think I’ve been able to do that since I was seventeen. But as much as I’m looking forward to being at home for more than two days at a time, I wasn’t all that excited to come home on this particular weekend.

Originally I was. When my brothers and I were planning out tour stops, I made sure that I wouldn’t have a show this weekend because it was Tommy’s birthday. There was no way I was going to miss it. But that was before Dia got sick. Before Tommy stopped confiding in me about what was happening with her treatment and how he was feeling about it all. Before I was going to have to potentially ruin the entire weekend by confronting him about it.

I tried to justify putting it off until next weekend, but I knew that was more about me trying to avoid the potential fallout of this conversation than it was about not wanting to make his birthday miserable. If both of us continue avoiding difficult conversations, we’re never going to talk about anything that actually matters.

That’s not us.

In an effort to minimize any angry outbursts, or at least contain them, I’ve decided to take Tommy
out to dinner tonight. He said it himself, it’s safer that way; he can’t throw a fit if he’s in public. I feel kind of guilty taking time away from the kids when I’m going to be gone again in thirty-six hours. But I would have felt just as guilty if we’d done this at home after they went to bed, and then woken them up with a shouting match. I don’t want to shout, I don’t want to fight. And I’m hoping that he doesn’t, either.

“Daddy, did you know that Jenna is having a baby?” Viggo asks me curiously as I neatly arrange chicken nuggets on a baking sheet like the obsessive control freak I am.

“I did know that.”

“But not right now, though. She’s having it on Valentine’s day.”

I look up at him and smile, noting how much of his attention is devoted to the preparation of his dinner. He’s practically drooling and it doesn’t even smell good yet. “Is that what she told you?”

“Yes, but she said he might not come on Valentine’s day, because sometimes baby’s don’t come when the doctor says they will.”

“That’s true. Ezra came a little earlier than we thought he would. And you were so late that we started to think you were never going to come out at all!”

“Really?” He gasps, his eyes growing wide in surprise. “Why wouldn’t I come out?”

“I don’t know, dude. We don’t always know why some babies come early and some come later. I guess you just weren’t ready.”

“Was I scared to come out?”

“I hope not.” I chuckle softly. “I know our family has always been a little crazy, but it’s nothing to be scared of.”

“I wasn’t scared of you!” He rolls his eyes at me. “That’s silly.”
“I don’t think you were scared of anything. I think you came exactly when you were meant to.”

“Do you think Jenna’s baby will come on Valentine’s day?”

“Maybe.” I tell him with a shrug, turning to put the baking sheet covered in nuggets into the oven. “If it was me, I’d definitely choose to have my birthday on Valentine’s day.”

“Why?” He frowns in confusion.

“Because of all the chocolate!”

“What chocolate?” Asks Tommy as he walks into the room, looking around as if the countertops might be covered in candy. “I don’t see any chocolate.”

“Duh. It’s not Valentine’s day.” Viggo informs him matter-of-factly before shaking his head at us and leaving the kitchen.

“Yeah, Tommy. Duh.” I snicker quietly, gathering up an armful of vegetables from the refrigerator.

I doubt my kids will actually eat much salad when there’s chicken nuggets and fries on their plate, too. But at least I can say I tried.

“Do I even want to know what that was about?”

“Where babies come from.” I reply simply, earning myself a look of total skepticism from him. “Okay, so it was more about when babies come, not where they come from.”

After giving that answer a few seconds of consideration, he suddenly looks very nervous. “You didn’t tell him that Shauntae’s pregnant, did you?”

“Of course not! We were talking about Jenna’s baby.”
“Oh.” He breathes a sigh of relief, leaning against the kitchen counter beside me and watching me as I chop cherry tomatoes in half. “Sorry, that was a totally stupid question. I know you wouldn’t do something like that.”

“I won’t hold it against you. Much.” I tease. “But only because it’s your birthday tomorrow, and it’s not nice to hold grudges against the elderly.”

“Fuck you. If you’re gonna be cracking shitty jokes about my age all night, you can go to dinner by yourself.”

I stick my lower lip out in a pitiful pout that leaves him fighting back a grin. “Boo.”

“And no birthday sex for you!”

“Why would I get birthday sex when it’s not my birthday?”

“Because it’s my birthday, and I want birthday sex. So unless you want me having it with someone else…”

“It’s not your birthday for another…” I glance down at my watch, pretending to be oblivious to the fact that he’s scowling at me. “Seven hours and eighteen minutes.”

“Whatever. I’m getting laid tonight, with or without you.”

“I’d prefer it was with me, if possible.”

His previously sour expression morphs into a deceptively sweet one in the blink of an eye. “Then you better start treatin’ me right.”

Before I can come up with an equally sassy retort, the doorbell rings. Neither of us rushes to get it, because the kids already know that it’s Jenna. The last echoes of the bell haven’t even died out before the sound of them charging towards the front door yelling, “Jenna’s here” fill the house.
They’ve never been indifferent to her presence, but even since she moved out it’s been an extra special treat to have her babysit them.

I haven’t seen Jenna since before I left for rehearsals in Tulsa. She wasn’t really showing then, and she’s barely showing now. But it’s enough that it’s noticeable to anyone who knows that she’s pregnant. Seeing her little baby bump, and how giddy Asta and Viggo are to touch it and say hello to the baby brings on a sudden surge of excitement for me as I think about how Shauntae will be showing in a few months from now, too. I can’t wait! And one shared, silent glance with Tommy tells me that he feels exactly the same.

Having lived with us for over two years, Jenna doesn’t need me to fill her in on the kid’s bedtimes, or what they are and aren’t allowed to do, or eat, or watch. She already has my cell phone number and Tommy’s, as well as Dia’s and Lisa’s in case of emergency. And she knows her way around the kitchen, so there’s no need for me to give her any more details about dinner other than what time it needs to be taken out of the oven. All Tommy and I have to do is kiss the kids goodbye, and throw out an unnecessary reminder to do whatever Jenna says on our way out of the house.

If only the rest of my night could be so simple.

Tommy spends half of the drive to the restaurant trying to guess what I got him for his birthday, and the other half badgering me to tell him what restaurant we’re going to. It’s kind of like being in the car with one of my kids, not a soon-to-be thirty-four year old man. But somehow his bratty, whiny side is way more adorable than theirs. I’m not quite sure how that works, and I’m pretty sure I’ll never know. I’m finding it a little harder than usual to enjoy it tonight, though, because I know that all of this playful banter isn’t going to last much longer. Once we get to the restaurant and I broach the subject of Dia’s test results with him, I doubt he’s going to be in such a good mood.

I manage to find parking in a garage in Santa Monica that’s only a couple of blocks from our dinner destination, and the two of us stroll down Third Street Promenade towards Santa Monica Boulevard hand in hand.

He smiles as I come to a stop outside of the restaurant, holding onto his hand to keep him from walking right past it. “I remember this place. We came here the night you moved to L.A.”

“We did.”

“We haven’t been here since then, though. What made you think of it?”
I’m honestly not sure. It’s not like it’s our favorite restaurant in the L.A. area. Like he said, we’ve only ever been here once. There are plenty of other places I could have taken him, but for whatever reason, this one came to mind when I was trying to decide where to make a reservation.

I shrug nonchalantly, holding the door open for him exactly as I did almost three years ago. “After you.”

“Keep all this chivalrous shit up and you might get lucky later.” He tells me, patting me on the chest when he steps past me into the restaurant.

And I fight to keep the smile on my face as the door closes behind me and I follow him inside, because I really don’t see me getting lucky tonight.

Not even a little bit.

It’s easy to hide how tense I am from him when we have people hovering around, filling our water glasses, taking our drink orders, and filling us in on the specials. And then he’s too focused on his menu to notice that I’ve let my fake smile drop for a few minutes (I don’t know why fake smiling uses more muscles than regular smiling, but I swear it does!). I wasn’t planning to start the evening off by telling him everything that’s been on my mind since my conversation with his mom a couple of weeks ago, I wanted him to at least get to enjoy his dinner first. But with every minute that passes, it feels more and more impossible to sit here for the next hour and pretend that everything is fine.

“What’s wrong?”

“Huh?”

Tommy frowns at me uncertainly as he sets his menu down on the table. “You were like… staring at your menu.”

“I was just… deciding what to have.”

Great. Now we’re both lying.
“I know that look.” He challenges, clearly unconvinced by my lame excuse. “That’s not your ‘salmon or sea bass’ look.”

“I have a ‘salmon or sea bass’ look?” I try to joke, but he simply gazes back across the table at me, unblinking.

Determined.

“What’s wrong, Taylor?”

“It’s nothing.” Wow. My pants are starting to feel really warm. Maybe it’s because they’re on fucking fire! “I-

“Are we ready to order?” Our server asks, looking back and forth between the two of us expectantly.

“Uh, yeah.” I quickly reply, trying not to sound too relieved. “I’ll have.”

“Could you give us a minute?” Tommy interrupts me, forcing a semi-polite smile that makes it clear it’s the only order he’s ready to give.

“Of course… I’ll check back in a little while.”

The server hasn’t even walked away before Tommy has turned his attention back to me, fixing me with an unwavering stare. I want to look right back at him and reassure him that I’m fine. But instead I find myself averting my eyes back to my menu, which only reinforces his belief that something is bothering me.

“I’m gonna keep sending that guy away until you tell me what’s going on. So if you wanna eat at some point tonight, you better start talking.”

Fuck it.

“I was just…” There has to be a better way to say this than bluntly blurting it out. But after days and
days of thinking this moment through, I still haven’t come up with one. I guess I was hoping that the perfect words would find me in the moment. Like that ever happens to me. “I was thinking about everything that’s been going on.”

“Like what?”

“Like… everything.” I repeat with a deep sigh. “The tour, and the baby, and your mom…”

“So?” He shakes his head in confusion, waiting for me to elaborate a little. “What about it all?”

“It’s just been a lot. For both of us, but… especially for you. You’ve been holding down the fort here for weeks now while I’ve been on the road, you’ve been doing pretty much everything alone-”

“This isn’t gonna be some big ‘I’m so proud of you’ birthday speech is it? ‘Cause you know I fucking hate shit like that.”

I could easily tell him that that’s exactly what I was about to say. Just laugh it off and let him think that everything is fine. But we’re here now.

“No, that’s not it. I mean, I am proud of you. I’m always proud of you, I think you’re amazing-”

He groans in disgust, folding his arms in front of him on the table top and dropping his forehead on them. “ Stop .”

“I just want you to know that I see it. I see how much you’re dealing with. I might not know how it feels for you, but I know that it’s been really hard, and painful… and that it’s probably going to stay that way for a while.” I continue gently, watching as he slowly raises his head and looks up at me warily. “I want to be there for you.”

“You are .” He argues, reaching across the table and lacing his fingers with mine.

“I could be there more, if you’d let me.”
“What’re you talking about?”

“I… I know about the test results your mom got a couple of weeks ago. She told me when she came over for brunch.”

His hand almost immediately releases his grip on mine as he rolls his eyes and looks away. “I know. She already told me off not telling you, like I’m fucking ten years old or something.”

“So… if you knew that I knew, why haven’t you said anything to me about it this whole time?”

“You didn’t tell me you knew, so I figured the whole thing was just like… over or whatever.” He shoots back petulantly. “I didn’t think it mattered anymore.”

“Of course it matters!”

“Why?”

Is he serious? “You got some really bad news and you didn’t tell me, Tommy. You were hurting, and you didn’t tell me.”

“It wasn’t like you could have done anything about it.” He mumbles, slumping against the back of his chair and refusing to look me in the eyes.

“I could have been there.”

“How?”

“I could have listened-”

“Not if I didn’t wanna fucking talk about it.”
It’s like I can see him withdrawing right in front of me. Everything about him is warning me off, from how far he’s leaning away from me in his chair, to his arms folded protectively over his chest. From the way he’s staring steadfastly at the table, to his sullen, muttered responses to everything I say.

“Didn’t we already have this fight?” I press gently, hoping that he’ll realize that we actually have been here before, and this problem was supposed to have been solved months ago. But he doesn’t acknowledge my question with so much as a shrug or another dismissive eye roll. “When your mom was first diagnosed, you tried to avoid talking to me about it or admitting that you were even upset. And we ended up fighting about it, and you walked out-”

“What’s your point? That we can’t have the same fight twice?”

“We can, I just… don’t see why we should. We don’t need to. This doesn’t need to be something we fight about, baby-”

“Don’t ‘baby’ me.” He snaps, pushing his chair back and standing up abruptly, drawing attention from some of the people sitting at nearby tables. “I’m not some weak, pathetic-”

“No one ever said you were!”

When he looks away from me again, he seems to notice the curious glances being cast our way. I can’t tell if he’s more embarrassed or annoyed by it, but either way he’s not willing to spend another minute being scrutinized. By them or by me. He grabs his jacket from the back of his chair and heads straight for the door, and after taking a second to get over the shock, I do the same. I catch up to him just outside the restaurant, but he doesn’t slow his pace when he hears me calling his name.

“Where are you going?”

“Home.”

“Tommy-”

“I don’t wanna do this right now.”
Out of sheer desperation, I grab him by the arm to stop him. It wasn’t the smartest idea, but I didn’t really put a whole lot of thought into it before I did it.

And now he looks ten times more pissed off than he did before.

“I’m sorry, okay? Can we please just… go somewhere and-” He shakes off my grip on his jacket, walking away from me without a word. “Tommy!” Nothing. “The car’s the other way!”

I know he heard me, so the fact that he hasn’t turned around or even slowed down means that he has no intention of going back to the car. Probably because it would mean being trapped in a moving vehicle with me for the next forty minutes, and that’s currently his worst nightmare.

My only real options here are to follow him up and down Santa Monica Boulevard all night, which isn’t likely to make him less pissed at me, or to go back to the car and wait there for a while in the hopes that he’ll cool off and come back.

But after an hour of sitting in the car, and multiple unanswered texts (including one telling him that if he doesn’t reply, I’m going home), I’m forced to accept that he’s not going to cool off anytime soon. So I reluctantly start the car and head home, taking the much longer route along Santa Monica Boulevard instead of getting on the freeway. I know it’s stupid to think I’m going to spot him walking along the street, and even if I do, I doubt he’d be willing to accept a ride from me right now. It’s much more likely that he found himself a nice, comfy bar stool to sulk on about ten minutes after I last saw him.

I just hope he texts me back sometime tonight to tell me where he is and when he’s coming home. I have to believe that, no matter how upset he is at me, he wouldn’t let it stand in the way of him celebrating his birthday with the kids. He knows how excited they are to give him their gifts and homemade cards tomorrow morning...

He’ll be there, he has to be.

I take my time getting home, because I don’t want to show up before the kids are in bed. It’s going to be awkward enough explaining to Jenna why I’m alone, I have no idea what I’d tell them. Unfortunately for me, it’s a Saturday night, so the kids don’t have to go to bed quite as early as they do on weekdays. By eight-thirty I’m sick of driving in circles, and I pull over long enough to text Jenna that I’m on my way home, to please keep the kids (and the dog) away from the front door so they won’t know I’m there, and that I’ll explain later. And Jenna, being the saint that she is, agrees without hesitation or question.
I manage to sneak up to my bedroom without any of the kids realizing I’ve come home, and I spend the next couple of hours lying on my bed, repaying the events of the evening and trying to figure out what I could have said or done differently. And, more importantly, what I can say or do to make this right when Tommy comes home.

If he’ll let me.

It’s just before eleven when there’s a quiet knock on the door, and I’m not surprised to find Jenna waiting for me on the other side when I open it.

“Hey.” She smiles sheepishly. “I didn’t wake you up, did I?”

“Trust me, if I was asleep, a knock like that wouldn’t have woken me up.” I assure her, closing the door behind me and following her over to the stairs. “Thanks for staying so late, and for… you know… going above and beyond. As always.”

“No problem.”

“I didn’t mean to put you in a weird position by asking you to basically lie to the kids for me.”

“It wasn’t lying, it was… withholding information.” She corrects me sympathetically as we make our way down to the family room.

“Yeah, well, lately that thin line between lying and withholding information has been getting thinner and thinner around here.”

“Uh-oh. That doesn’t sound good.”

“It’s a long story.” I sigh tiredly. “Basically, it starts with Tommy not telling me when important stuff happens because he doesn’t want to talk about it, and ends with him walking out on me at a restaurant the night before his birthday.”
She frowns in concern as she takes a seat beside me on the sofa. “I’m sorry.”

“Thanks.”

“I’m sure things will be okay once he’s had time to think it over. When he’s ready to talk, he’ll talk.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“I know I am.” She reassures me confidently. “I lived with you guys for the first two years of your relationship, remember? I practically watched you figure out how to live together day in and day out. I watched you learn to communicate with each other. I wish I could replay it for you right now, like a highlight reel or something, because I swear you could actually see the two of you getting better and better at letting each other in and leaning on each other.”

“I remember.” I smile sadly, glancing around the room as a thousand fights and heated debates play out everywhere I look. Along with a thousand heartfelt apologies and compromises. “Lately it just feels like we’re backsliding.”

“Well… a lot of the time this stuff isn’t linear, you know? It’s ten steps forward and one step back.” I open my mouth to correct that statement, but she knows what I’m about to say before I can get a single word out. “And sometimes it’s one step forwards and ten steps back.”

“You were a psych major, weren’t you?”

“I might have taken a class or two. Or ten.” She nudges me with her shoulder. “And in Tommy’s case… I don’t think he’s back sliding so much as being shoved backwards. If you think about it, what’s going on with his mom is probably the hardest thing he’s had to deal with in years. I bet he’s all flight right now. His mind is screaming at him to put as much distance as possible between him and anything that might cause him pain. And if he thinks you’re trying to stop him from doing that, he’s going to fight you. It’s like… survival instinct.”

Hearing her say that takes me right back to the night we first found out that Dia had cancer. I remember looking at him in our bedroom after we got home, looking into his eyes and seeing how afraid he was. I remember wondering if he was going to fight me or flee from me when I tried to make him talk about how he was feeling.
He’s kept me guessing on that one ever since.

“I know you’re right.” I admit, rubbing my tired eyes and flopping back against the plush couch cushions. “And I know it’ll work out, somehow, because it has to.”

Because I’d do anything for him.

Even if that means keeping my mouth shut and letting him ‘withhold’ as much information as he wants. If that’s what he thinks he needs right now, then… that’s what I’ll give him.

“He’ll come round eventually. Maybe not as soon as you’d like…”

“Well, no, because that would be now .”

She smirks knowingly, giving me a commiserative pat on the shoulder. “Patience, grasshopper.”

“You’re gonna be a really great mom, you know that?”

“I don’t know that.” She admits. “But I’ll take your word for it.”

We spend the next hour or so catching up on everything that’s happened in our lives since we last had the chance to sit down and talk. It feels so good to see her so settled and content, and so excited (if a little anxious) about motherhood. She even shows me a list of baby names she’s been keeping on her phone, and asks for my thoughts on them. Baby names was always Natalie’s thing, she could spend hours browsing websites and scouring books trying to come up with the perfect name combinations. I was a little less intense about the whole thing, but that doesn’t mean I didn’t have some strong opinions on the subject.

I can’t help but smile when I think about all of silly bickering matches that Tommy and I are likely to get into over baby names as the next eight months go by. We haven’t even started discussing it yet, but it’s one of many baby related experiences that I cannot wait to share with him.

By the time Jenna leaves, and I’ve made my way back up to bed, it’s just past midnight. My heart sinks when I see that number staring back at me from the alarm clock on my nightstand. I wasn’t
expecting tonight to go well, exactly, but I never expected that we wouldn’t be sharing the same bed. Or that we wouldn’t at least be under the same roof. I thought that I would get to be the first person to wish him happy birthday as soon as midnight arrived.

Right now I have no idea when I’ll get to wish him happy birthday. All I can do is hope that he’ll be here when I wake up in the morning.

And if it’s not asking for too much, maybe he’ll also be willing to speak to me.
Chapter 52

This is so not how I thought Tommy’s birthday would play out.

Technically, it’s only been his birthday for about seven hours now, and I’ve been asleep for most of that time. But now I’m awake, and he’s still not here. He hasn’t called or texted, so I have no idea where the hell he is or if he’s planning on putting in an appearance this morning.

He should be here.

I should have woken up beside him, or maybe been woken up by him. And barring any unforeseen circumstances, we most likely would have had some of that birthday sex he was so excited about yesterday. Then we would have taken a shower together (assuming we hadn’t already been in the shower when the birthday sex occurred). Then we would have gotten dressed. Or I would have gotten dressed while he tried to un dress me again, claiming that this particular occasion has a strict ‘birthday suits only’ dress code. It’s anyone’s guess as to whether or not his flirting would have worked. Maybe it wouldn’t have on a normal day. But today is his birthday, and I would hate to deny the birthday boy even one wish.

But none of those things are going to happen this morning, because he’s not here.

The space beside me in bed is empty. So there will be no birthday sex, no joint shower, no flirting, and no birthday suits. The only one making any wishes is me, and I’m wishing (and hoping) that
he’s asleep downstairs in the movie room so that I won’t have to deal with the kids pestering me about why he’s not here and when they’ll get to give him their gifts.

As I make my way down the stairs, the smell of coffee grows stronger and stronger with each step. It makes my heart leap (and no, it’s not because I love coffee that much). Penny and Ezra both know how to make coffee, even though neither of them drinks it. But I haven’t heard any movement from the kids bedrooms so far this morning, which means Tommy is more than likely the one brewing it.

I exhale an immediate sigh of relief as I round the corner into the kitchen to find him grabbing a carton of milk from the fridge. “I was hoping it was you down here.” He doesn’t reply, but at least he acknowledges me with a brief look over his shoulder. “Where were you last night? I was worried.”

“I spent the night at Adam’s.”

To say that I’m surprised by this information would be one hell of an understatement. As far as I know, they haven’t really spoken in weeks, and they haven’t seen each other since the night of Dia’s surgery over two months ago. But then, maybe they text all the time.

Maybe it’s just one more thing Tommy hasn’t been telling me about.

“Since when are you guys hanging out again?”

“Since last night.” He says, using the same ‘duh’ tone that our kids use with us all the time.

“Okay…”

After pouring himself a cup of coffee, he returns the milk to the fridge and finally turns to face me.

“He texted me just after I left the restaurant. He wanted to wish me ‘happy birthday’, and he asked if we were doing anything to celebrate. I told him that we were supposed to be going out to dinner but we weren’t anymore.” That’s one way to put it. It’s a very simple, watered down version of the truth. But again, he’s getting good at leaving out the most pertinent facts when relaying information to people. “He said he was having some friends over for dinner if I wanted to come by. Terrance was gonna be there, and I hadn’t seen him in forever, so…”
“And you ended up spending the whole night?” I frown. “Why didn’t you just come home?”

He gives me a look. A very obvious ‘you know why’ look. And then he lies. “I didn’t wanna waste any more money on Uber or a cab, so I had to wait until someone was sober enough to give me a ride. I didn’t realize no one was gonna be sober until like dawn.”

“So what time did you get home?”

“Why? Am I grounded for missing curfew or something?”

“Tommy-”

“I need to take a shower.” He sighs, placing his untouched cup of coffee on the counter top beside him and walking towards me.

It’s probably a mistake for me to step in front of him and block his path as he tries to leave the room, but I refuse to just stand here and watch him go. “You need to listen to me first.”

“No, I don’t. You want me to listen to you, but I don’t need to listen to you.”

“Would you drop the attitude for five seconds and hear me out?” He heaves another deep, incredibly irritated sigh, just in case I wasn’t well aware of how little he wants to be around me right now. But at least he stops. “I’m sorry-”

“Okay. Can I go now?”

“God-fucking- damnit, Tommy! Just shut the hell up and listen to me.”

Apparently a little cussing was all I needed to do in order to shock him into silence and get his attention. He looks up at me, his eyes meeting mine for a moment before he looks away again. The scowl is still etched into his brow, the furrows so deep that under any other circumstances I’d warn him about the possibility of wrinkles.
But now is so not the time.

“I know I shouldn’t have brought all of that stuff up last night. The last thing I wanted to do was fight with you and ruin your birthday. I was just worried and confused… and I guess I was a little hurt. And I thought that maybe if we talked about it while we were in a public place, things wouldn’t go as badly as they did. I mean, you were the one who said you had to ‘behave’ in situations like that, remember?”

For a moment his expression seems to soften a little at the memory, but he quickly rolls his eyes and shakes it off. “That was different. I wasn’t fucking blindsided and cornered that time, it was my choice.”

“I know. And… I know it has to be your choice to talk about it this time, too.”

“You do?” He asks skeptically, like I’m trying to trick him into doing something he doesn’t want to do.

“I don’t know why you didn’t tell me about your mom, I don’t even know if you know why. But I do know you had a reason, whatever it was. And I need to respect that, no matter how difficult it is when it feels like you’re hiding things from me-”

“I’m not hiding things from you.” He insists so earnestly that it’s almost impossible not to believe him. “It’s not like I don’t trust you; you know I do. It’s not even about you-”

“I know.”

“I just… sometimes I…” He shakes his head faintly, hopelessly. “I can’t, Taylor.”

“I know.”

“I just… sometimes I…” He shakes his head faintly, hopelessly. “I can’t, Taylor.”

“I know.” I assure him sympathetically, making a tentative reach for his hand. I’m half expecting him to pull it away before I can so much as brush my fingers against his skin. I’m more than half expecting it. So it comes as a pleasant surprise when he lets me take his hand in mine and hold it for a few seconds.

A few seconds is all he’ll allow either of us, though.
“I should take a shower before the kids wake up.” He mumbles, tugging his hand out of my grasp and keeping his eyes trained on the floor as he steps around me and leaves the room.

I can’t decide if that counts a successful conversation or not. At least it was a conversation. It could have easily been an extension of last night’s fight, or he could have just continued to give me the silent treatment until he absolutely had to speak to me to avoid anyone noticing that he wasn’t. Instead, he opened up to me more in the last thirty seconds of that conversation than he has in weeks. Possibly more than he will for weeks, even months, to come.

And I’m not entirely sure how to feel about that, either.

I don’t have time to dwell on it right now, which is probably for the best. Almost as soon as I hear the sound of our bedroom door closing behind him, I hear the sound of another one opening. Moments later, River trudges sleepily into the kitchen, yawning as he looks around the room somewhat disorientedly.

“Where’s Tommy?”

“Taking a shower.” I’m so glad I can at least honestly tell him that, rather than having to make up some pathetic lie.

“When are we having breakfast?”

“We’re not having breakfast today, buddy. We’re meeting Dia and Lisa for brunch in a couple of hours, remember?”

He frowns for a moment, letting that information sink in. “But I’m hungry now.”

“You can have a Pop-Tart.” His eyes light up immediately, the prospect of a sugary snack quickly chasing away his early morning mind fog. “A Pop-Tart.” I emphasize as he hurries over to the pantry. “One.”

“One packet?”
He gets his sneaky streak from me. I don’t know if I should be proud of that or not. “No, one Pop-Tart.”

“But there’s two in the packet. The other one will get stale if I don’t eat it.”

“I’m sure Viggo will help with that.”

“Why do I have to help?” Wines Viggo as he wanders into the room, barely conscious and completely ignorant of the context of my previous statement. “I’m too tired to help.”

“You’re too tired to help River finish a packet of Pop-Tarts?!” I gasp in mock concern. “Maybe you should go back to bed and sleep until school tomorrow.”

Viggo has already snatched the half empty packet of Pop-Tarts off of the kitchen island before I’ve finished talking. And neither he nor River say another word to me before they take their pre-brunch snacks into the family room to fire up the TV. Now that the two of them are awake, it’ll only be a matter of minutes before the other three make their way downstairs in search of food and mindless Sunday morning entertainment. It doesn’t matter which of them is the first to wake up, as soon as one of them resumes consciousness, the others are never far behind.

Between keeping them from stuffing their faces with breakfast pastries and handfuls of cereal, and then making sure that they don’t get so wrapped up in a movie that they forget to go upstairs and get dressed, I don’t have time to check in on Tommy. And he doesn’t come down from our room until a few minutes before we have to leave. Not that I expected him to, really.

Our conversation this morning may not have felt all that resolved, but it definitely felt like it was over.

We’re late getting to brunch, which isn’t at all surprising; we’re late for almost everything. Tommy’s family is already waiting for us at Tally Rand, and as soon as he sees the “Happy Birthday” helium balloon that Lisa is holding, he mutters a disgusted “fuck”, and turns right back around to walk out of the diner. Unfortunately for him, he has a wall of kids blocking his exit. The hostess quickly shows us to the row of three tables that have been pushed together to accommodate our group, and Lisa and I try to arrange the seating so that the kids aren’t all at one end of the table with the adults at the other. They need at least couple of grown ups scattered amongst them to keep the volume under control and put a stop to any inappropriate behavior as soon as it begins. Although, the older Ezra and Penny get, the less necessary that seems to be.
Either Tommy is genuinely in a better mood than he has been all morning, or he’s doing an exceptional job of hiding how pissy he really is. Because once we’ve all taken our seats and placed our orders, and he’s opened everyone’s cards and gifts, he’s laughing and chatting away with his family and the kids like nothing is wrong. And because there are so damn many of us at the table, no one seems to notice that he and I aren’t being as affectionate with each other as we usually would be.

Everything is going better than I’d hoped or expected, right up until I feel my phone vibrating in my pocket. When I pull it out and see Shauntae’s name on the screen, it takes me a moment to get over the surprise and actually accept the call.

“Hey!”

“Hi, Taylor. It’s Sam.”

“Oh, hi! What’s up?”

“Uh… okay. So… I don’t want you guys to panic or anything, but…” Too late. As soon as I heard the word ‘but’ after that statement, the panic set it. I get out of my seat, mumbling an ‘excuse me’ to everyone as I step away from the table and out of earshot. Sirens are going off in my head, and it feels as though every muscle in my body is poised to do whatever I need to do in response to whatever Sam says next. “Shauntae hasn’t been feeling so great this weekend. She had some cramping yesterday, but we didn’t wanna worry you in case it was nothing.”

“But… now you think it’s something?”

There’s a pause. Probably not a very long one, but to me, in this moment, it feels painfully long.

“She had a little spotting.” Shit. “We called Doctor O’Conner, and she said it’s probably nothing, but she asked us to come into the clinic.”

“Tomorrow?”

“No, right now. They’re open until noon today.” I automatically check my watch and find that it’s almost eleven thirty. I’m not sure we’d be able to get over to Beverly Hill that fast even if we left right this second. “Doctor O’Conner said she’d stay a little late if we could get there within the next hour. If you guys can’t make it, we can call you as soon as we know anything.”
“No, we can be there in about forty minutes, I think.”

“Okay, great.” She sighs with relief. “We’ll see you soon.”

“Yeah, see you soon.”

The second I turn around to head back to the table, I nearly walk into Tommy. His presence right behind me surprises me so much that I almost fall backwards into a rack of Sunday newspapers.

“What’s wrong?” He asks as I regain my balance and catch my breath. “Where are we gonna be in forty minutes?”

I was already dreading having to break this to him, but it’s so much harder now that he’s actually standing right in front of me. His expression is unreadable, but the look in his eyes, the dread and the fear, is so obvious that it leaves me momentarily speechless.

“Taylor-”

“It’s probably nothing.” I assure him quickly, hoping I sounded more convincing to him than I did in my own head. “Shauntae wasn’t feeling so good, so she’s going to the clinic. I told Sam we’d meet them there.”

“What do you mean… ‘wasn’t feeling good’?”

I inhale deeply, and I notice him instinctively do the same. “Sam said that she’s had some cramping… and some spotting.”

He looks like he’s about to throw up. He sucks in another slow, shaky breath before letting it out in an even less steady exhale. “Okay.”

“Okay…?”
“Okay, let’s go.”

I nod, giving his arm a gentle squeeze that seems to offer him little to no comfort. “We need to talk to Lisa first-”

“Why?” He frowns.

“Because we can’t take the kids with us, and your mom’s not up to babysitting all five of them.” I explain as calmly as I can. “Don’t worry, it won’t take long.”

With a grudging sigh, he follows me back into the main dining area and over to our waiting family. Ezra is the only one of the kids who seems even slightly intrigued by what’s happening, especially once he sees the looks on our faces. Luckily, the others are all too preoccupied with pancakes to notices that anything is wrong.

“Lisa, could we borrow you for a minute?” I ask, forcing a small smile as her eyes dart back and forth between us suspiciously. “Please?”

She obligingly gets out of her seat, and the three of us step away from the table. “What’s going on?”

“Tommy and I need to go.”

“Where?”

“We can’t tell you.” I reply apologetically, cutting her off as she opens her mouth to protest. “We’ll explain everything later, I promise. But we don’t really have time right now. We just need you to watch the kids for a couple of hours.”

“But… we can’t stay here that long!”

“I’ll trade you our mini van for your car? You can take them anywhere you want, whether it’s to your place, or a movie, or the zoo. If you have to spend any money, I’ll pay you back-”
She rolls her eyes and waves away my pleading. “I don’t care about that.”

“Please, Lis.” Adds Tommy, finally speaking up and drawing Lisa’s attention to him.

I assume she can see the same look in his eyes as I could, because she doesn’t hesitate a second longer before agreeing to do whatever we need her to do. After grabbing Bridget’s seat out of her car, she hands her keys over to us and watches us drive away. I try not to speed too much, but all I really want to do is run through every red light and stop sign between us and the clinic. I can feel the impatience radiating from Tommy every time we have to slow down even a little. Impatience, and… something else. I can’t put my finger on what the emotion is. Maybe it’s a giant mixture of emotions. A huge, unruly knot in the pit of his stomach.

Just like the one in mine.

Every few minutes I open my mouth to say something, anything. But nothing ever comes out, because I can’t think of anything to say that would make him feel better, and the last thing I want to do is make him feel worse somehow. I just hate sitting here beside him and doing nothing, so physically close and yet so disconnected emotionally.

I’ve just turned the car onto La Cienega Boulevard when he suddenly reaches across the gear shift and grabs my right hand. The shock, and the fact that my hand was on the steering wheel, causes me to momentarily swerve towards the sidewalk. I correct course as quickly as I can, allowing him to pull my hand away from the wheel and hold onto it tightly.

I repeatedly tell myself that everything will be fine, but no amount of reasoning or sense settles my nerves. I know that it’s somewhat normal for women to experience cramping and even bleeding in their first trimester; Natalie had both when she was pregnant with Asta. Not that Natalie’s pregnancy with Asta is the best example of things turning out great in the end, but…

Because it’s Sunday, it’s a lot easier to find parking near the clinic than it has been on any of the weekdays we’ve been here. Although, part of me kind of wishes it had taken us a little longer. Tommy hesitates before letting go of my hand so that I can turn off the engine and pull the keys out of the ignition. And then we both hesitate a moment longer before forcing ourselves out of the car.

The waiting room is silent and empty when we open the door of the clinic and step inside. There isn’t even a receptionist working, so we tentatively make our way cautiously across the room towards the short hallway lined with doors to exam rooms. Only one of them is open, and Shauntae, Sam and Doctor O’Conner are waiting for us inside. They all offer us small smiles as soon as we appear in the open doorway, and I try to do the same for Shauntae’s sake. I’m just not sure that I
succeed. She looks so anxious, wringing her hands in her lap, and if I’m not mistaken, there’s a sizeable amount of guilt weighing on her, too.

All I can think of to do is walk over to her and place a reassuring hand on her shoulder, and Tommy is right beside me, giving her hand a gentle squeeze.

“Do we know anything?” I ask the doctor hopefully, but my heart sinks she shakes her head.

“So far I’ve only had a chance to check Shauntae’s vitals. We were just about to take a peak with the ultrasound.”

Doctor O’Conner turns on the monitor beside her, and Shauntae carefully reclines back on the exam table with Sam clutching her hand.

“I’ve been really careful.” She swears wholeheartedly while the doctor squirts some ultrasound gel onto her belly. “I don’t work too much, I eat good, whole foods, I-”

“It’s so not your fault.” I tell her adamantly. “We don’t even know that anything’s wrong.”

But we’re about to find out.

At first I find myself watching the transducer as Doctor O’Conner guides it slowly back and forth across Shauntae’s belly. Then I realize that the only thing I need to be looking at right now is the monitor, and I immediately redirect my gaze to the screen. I’ve seen many ultrasounds in my life, but I’m still no expert. I usually rely on a medical professional to tell me what it is I’m looking at, especially when it’s as unclear as it is right now.

Out of nowhere, Tommy murmurs an apology and makes a beeline for the door. I don’t even have time to react before he disappears out into the hallway, and it takes a moment for the fact that he’s gone to really sink in. But as soon as it does, I express my own apologies and promise Shauntae that I’ll be right back before hurrying out after him. I’m half expecting him to have fled the clinic entirely, so the sight of him sitting in one of the waiting room chairs with his head in his hands stops me in my tracks.

“Tommy…” I sigh sadly, sympathetically, slowly approaching his seat and crouching down in front of him. “I know you’re scared, but-”
“There was no baby.”

“What?”

“On the screen.” He elaborates as he lifts his head to look me in the eyes. “There was nothing.”

I place my hand on his knee, stroking my thumb back and forth over the fabric of his jeans. “You didn’t even give her time to find anything.”

“I…” He shakes his head miserably. “If we lose this baby, I’m done.”

“Done?”

“I can’t do this again. I’m tired of feeling like shit over stuff I have no control over. But I can control whether or not I wind up in this situation again.”

I know it’s pointless to fight him on this right now; he’s not in a place where he’d be able to truly hear me anyway. Maybe he never will be when it comes to this subject, not if it turns out that we actually have lost the baby.

All I can do is hope like hell that we haven’t.

“It’s gonna be okay, whatever happens. We can handle it, we always do.”

The sound of someone clearing their throat behind us causes us both to look up suddenly, and we see Sam standing over by the hallway. “Sorry, I don’t wanna interrupt, but…”

“It’s okay.” I tell her, standing up and offering Tommy a hand to help him do the same. “We’re coming.”

She turns and heads back into the exam room, and for a while Tommy seems unable, or maybe just
unwilling, to take my hand and go back in there with me. But eventually he finds the strength to do what he knows he has to do, and we turn to face whatever news is waiting for us.

Together.

Shauntae still looks anxious as we step into the room again, but something feels different now than it did only a few minutes ago. Doctor O’Conner is still smiling, only now it strikes me as being more sincere and less about offering Tommy and I some kind of obligatory encouragement.

“Did you find anything?” I ask her uncertainly.

“I’d say so.” She points to the monitor. “Do you see that?”

I frown, leaning a little closer in case I’m not really seeing what I’m pretty damn sure I’m seeing. “Is that…”

“That’s Baby A.” Smirks Doctor O’Conner, pointing to another spot on the monitor. “And that’s Baby B.”

“Why are there two babies?” Tommy asks, dumbfounded. I can’t help but laugh out loud, not only at his question but at this whole situation.

“Because you’re having twins.” She chuckles softly. “Congratulations!”
I'm so sorry the wait for chapters has been so long, guys. :( I try to stay 5 chapters or so ahead of what I'm posting, but I haven't been able to do any writing at all for over a month now so I've fallen behind. Hopefully I'll be able to get back to writing more frequently within the next month or so.

The sound of Baby B’s heartbeat fills the small exam room, just as Baby A’s did only moments ago. And as I listen to the rhythmic rushing noise, and watch the peaks and dips appear at the bottom of the ultrasound monitor, it feels like I fall into some kind of trance. And suddenly, each beat of our baby’s heart is accompanied by the same word, over and over again, echoing in my head.

Twins.

Twins.

Twins.

Twins.
No matter how many times I repeat that word over and over in my head, it still makes no sense to me. I mean… of course it makes sense; we transferred two embryos, and there was always a possibility that both would take. Or one embryo could have split and become twins. It was never outside the realm of possibility. Hell, triplets, even quadruplets were never entirely outside the realm of possibility. I just never believed any of those things would happen!

And now that one of them has, I don’t know how I’m supposed to feel about it.

“I don’t get it…” Tommy frowns at the screen, his eyes wide and unblinking. “How are there two babies in there now when there was only one before?”

“There were two babies before, we just couldn’t see the second one.” Doctor O’Conner tells him somewhat apologetically. “It doesn’t happen too often, but it’s not unheard of for twin pregnancies to be missed on early ultrasounds. Depending on the angle and the position of the babies, one might be ‘hiding’ behind the other. It’s especially common with identical twins.”

“Wait… so you’re saying… they’re identical?” I stammer dumbfoundedly, and Doctor O’Conner nods.

“So like… they’re gonna look exactly the same?” Tommy adds anxiously. “We’re so screwed…”

“Are you guys okay?” Shauntae inquires nervously.

“Us?” I reply quickly, my voice sounding much higher pitched than usual as a result of my horrible attempt to seem unfazed. “Yeah, of course! Why wouldn’t we be okay?”

“Yeah…” Agrees Tommy, his lips curling into a strained smile. “We wanted a baby, and now we have two, so… that’s kinda like a free gift with purchase, right?”

I hope I sounded more convincing than that!

“Don’t worry, it’s completely normal to not be jumping for joy over news like this.” Doctor O’Conner assures us as she switches the ultrasound monitor off. “Unless they were hoping and trying for twins, most couples need some time for the shock to wear off before the excitement can
“Right.” I nod confidently, turning back to Shauntae. “Please don’t think that we’re not happy about this, because we are.”

“Yeah, we’re not like disappointed or anything.” Adds Tommy with a much more heartfelt smile. “No way.”

I can’t help but smile as I watch her take a deep, relieved breath while the doctor wipes the remainder of the ultrasound gel from her skin. “Are you okay?”

“Me?” Shauntae practically squeaks.

“I know we talked about all this at the surrogacy agency, and you said you’d be okay with carrying twins, but… that wasn’t really what you signed on for.”

“But I still meant it. I know carrying twins is going to be a lot harder, but you guys trusted me to do this, and I’m not going to let you down.”

“We know.” Tommy assures her gratefully.

“So everything’s okay?” Sam asks Doctor O’Conner hopefully. “The baby… babies are okay?”

“So far, everything looks good to me. Both babies are measuring right on track, and both have strong heartbeats.”

“I’m so sorry I freaked you guys out and made you come all the way down here for nothing.” Shauntae sighs wearily as she sits up on the exam table.

“Don’t be.” I tell her adamantly. “It wasn’t nothing.”

“I just never had any symptoms like this when I was pregnant with Stella. I didn’t want to sit around and hope everything was okay when it might not be.”
“Hey, if something doesn’t feel right, we’d rather you get it checked out.” Smirks Tommy. “I wouldn’t even care if turned out it was just gas or something.”

“Some cramping isn’t uncommon in early pregnancy, but if it doesn’t stop within a couple of days, or it gets any worse, I want you to come back in as soon as possible.” Doctor O’Conner explains. “Otherwise, I’ll see you all back here for our scheduled nine week ultrasound on Friday. And if everything still looks as good as it does today, I can sign off on transferring you to your regular OB.”

“Thank’s, Doctor O’Conner.”

The four of us watch wordlessly as the doctor exits the exam room, and once the door closes behind her, we simply stand (and sit, in Shauntae’s case) in silence. I struggle to think of something to say, but my mind is such a mess right now that I can’t come up with a complete, coherent sentence. I get the feeling that I’m not the only one having that problem. Even after Tommy and I have excused ourselves so that Shauntae can finish cleaning up and get her things together, neither of us speaks. We sit in the waiting room, side by side and shellshocked, until Shauntae and Sam join us.

“So…” I take a breath as we stand to meet them. “Do you guys wanna go grab a coffee or… something? We can catch our breaths and talk about all this?”

“I wish we could.” Shauntae smiles faintly, apologetically. “But we left Stella with our neighbors. We told them we’d be back as soon as possible, they have a family thing to get to.”

“Right. We should probably be getting back anyway. We left the kids with Tommy’s mom and sister.”

“Kinda ditched them in the middle of my birthday brunch, to be more accurate.” Tommy snorts softly. “We’re gonna have some ‘spainin’ to do.”

“It’s your birthday?” Shauntae’s shoulders slump with regret. “I sure know how to pick my moments.”

“It’s not like you decided to have cramps this weekend, sweetie.” Sam reminds her as she wraps a comforting arm around her waist.
“Exactly.” I immediately and wholeheartedly affirm.

Tommy shrugs, trying for a smile. “We can just say this is your gift to me.”

“Interrupting your birthday brunch with your family to make you rush across town to a fertility clinic for no reason?” She questions with a confused chuckle.

“Not for no reason. I mean, maybe it’s not what we all thought the reason was, thank fuck, but… it’s not like we’re walking out of here with no more than we walked in with. You got me a baby for my birthday. Well… another one.”

“’Cause you can never have too many of those, right?” She teases semi-seriously.

“We would’ve had six kids.” I point out. “One more won’t hurt.”

“You’re not the one who has to give birth to them.” Tommy smirks, but his amused expression quickly turns to one of contrition when he notices Shauntae’s face pale slightly. “Sorry.”

“No… it’s okay. I’m… I’m sure after the first one comes out, the other one will just… shoot right out after it.”

Sam nods, forcing an overly enthusiastic smile that I’m sure fools absolutely no one. “Right. Like a slip and slide!”

“That’s… quite a visual.” I laugh softly. “And on that note, we should probably let you guys get back to Stella.”

“Well, it was great seeing you. Even if it was under some very odd circumstances.” Shauntae tells me as we share a quick hug.

“You, too. Maybe you guys can come over for dinner or something when I’m in town again next weekend?”
“Sounds great!” She smiles, letting go of me and turning to Tommy. “Happy birthday, I hope?”

He chuckles, gratefully returning her hug. “It’s definitely one for the books.”

Once Shauntae and Sam have said their goodbyes, it’s just the two of us again. I’m still not sure how I’m feeling about everything, so I can’t even attempt to figure out what Tommy might be thinking. I know I’m not nearly as calm about all of this as I was pretending to be for everyone else’s sake, but maybe Tommy really is as okay with this unexpected turn of events as he appears to be. Having one more baby than we’d planned on is infinitely better than losing the one baby we thought we had. And after thinking that we were on the verge of experiencing that loss, maybe he’s just glad to suddenly be so far from that pain.

“I guess we should head home-”

“Not yet.” He cuts me off quickly.

“Okay…”

“I can’t go home and like pretend everything’s totally normal. I need a minute to…. catch my breath, you know? Like you said.”

I breathe a sigh of relief, feeling no more ready to face anyone else than he apparently does. “Wanna get a coffee?”

“Sure.” He casts a cheeky, sideways glance at me as we make our way to the main exit. “If it’s Irish.”

We have to walk a few blocks to find somewhere that looks like it might serve boozy coffees without expecting us to buy food to go along with them. I can see the disdain on Tommy’s face as the hostess leads me through the café and shows us to a small table out on the patio. I’m sure he’d feel more comfortable sitting in some dark dive bar than on a sun soaked patio, surrounded by a bunch of mimosa sipping, Beverly Hills brunchers.

The waiter has barely finished asking if we’d like something to drink before Tommy has started placing his order. As much as I could use something stronger than black coffee right now, I know I shouldn’t be drinking if I have to drive us home in a little while. He clearly disapproves of my choice
to stay one hundred percent sober, but he doesn’t push the matter.

“Do you wanna talk about stuff now, or wait until you’ve had something to drink?” I ask, keeping my tone light and teasing even though I don’t feel quite as jovial as I sound.

“Not sure I even know what the fuck to say.”

“Well… how are you feeling?”

“Not sure I know that, either.” He laughs softly before taking a long sip from the glass of ice water in front of him. “It’s like… it doesn’t feel real, so I can’t really feel it. If that makes any sense.”

“Total and complete sense.” I smile, raising my own glass of water to him before drinking.

“Twins...”

“Twins.” I exhale, the word still sounding like gibberish to me. “That’s two babies.”

“Thanks for clarifying.”

“I just… I didn’t see this coming.”

He shakes his head dazedly, staring at the single flower sitting in the little glass vase on the table between us. “Me either. I mean… how the fuck are we even gonna do this?”

“I don’t know.” I admit. “It’s not like seven kids is unheard of; I am one of seven kids, and my parents handled it just fine. Like it was totally normal and every family was that big.”

“Yeah, but they never had two newborns at the same time. You’re all at least a couple of years apart in age, and Ike was like sixteen when Zoe was born, right?”
“Seventeen.”

“And you were older than Ezra is now, so... your parents had you guys to help once they hit lucky number seven.”

“Well, Ezra will be thirteen when the babies are born. He’s used to having babies around. And Penny will be eleven by then, too, and she’s been good with babies since 

“But they’re not gonna be the ones getting up twenty times a night to feed and change two screaming infants.” He points out, visibly horrified by the prospect of getting even less sleep than we would have with one baby. “I don’t know... I feel like we’re gonna be totally in over our heads seven months from now, and I’m freaking the fuck out.”

“If it’s any consolation, you hid it pretty well around Shauntae.”

“Good! I don’t want her thinking I’m mad or whatever. I meant it when I said I wasn’t disappointed... but that doesn’t mean I’m not shitting myself over here.”

One of the women at a table a few feet away from ours glances over her shoulder at him and scowls in disapproval, but he doesn’t notice. And all my energy is going into keeping a straight face to avoid pissing her off even more and having her complain to management about us disrupting her fancy brunch with our not-so-fancy language.

“I’m right there with you.”

“But... it’s done. It’s happening, no matter what we planned or how we feel, so... I guess we should just get the hell over ourselves and be happy about it...?”

“Is that a statement or a question?”

“I don’t know.” He frowns uncertainly. “Can it be both?”

“If you want.”
“It’s just scary. I knew we could handle one more kid. And hell, who knows, maybe another one some day. But two at the same time? What if it’s too much? What if we can’t take care of two of them as well as we could’ve taken care of one? And what if us running around after two babies means the other kids feel ignored and like we never have time for them anymore?”

“We’ll figure it out. We’ll hire someone to help out, if we need to.” I assure him, reaching across the table to take his hand in mine.

He clasps it tightly, the worry still etched across his brow as the waiter returns with our drinks and places them on the table between us. We reluctantly release our grip on each other’s hands and we pick up the mugs in front of us and stare silently into the steaming, dark coffee they hold. I find myself almost hypnotized by a cluster of tiny bubbles in the middle of my mug, and for a moment it wipes every thought from my mind and leaves me feeling incredibly calm.

“Do we even have room for two babies?” Tommy asks, breaking the moment of tranquility I’d found myself in. “I mean, I know babies don’t take up much room, but their stuff does. And they grow. We don’t have enough room for two more chairs at the dining table, and we don’t have enough room for a bigger table!”

“Tommy, it’s okay.”

“No, it’s not! Where’s the seventh kid gonna eat?!”

I can’t stop myself from laughing softly as I give his hand a reassuring squeeze. “We’ll figure it out.”

“You can’t just keep saying that, like it makes all our problems go away.”

“Why not?” I shrug. “We will figure it out. We always do.”

“I don’t know, Taylor… I feel like we never really thought this through to begin with.” My grip on his fingers automatically loosens as I try to process his words.

“Are… are you having seconds thoughts about us having a baby at all? Because it’s a little late for that-”
“No! *Fuck* no, I would never.” He exclaims earnestly. “I’m not talking about the baby, I’m talking about the… logistics or whatever. Like what did we think we were gonna do with the baby? Put it in with Asta and have it waking her up all night? Or have Asta move into Penny’s room?”

“Why not? They love each other, they get along great ninety percent of the time-”

“Yeah, *now*. But only because Penny has her own room, she has privacy. She’s not gonna want her four year old sister getting into her stuff and taking over her space.”

“It wouldn’t be like that. I shared a room with Ike and Zac when we were kids, and Zac was five years younger than Ike. And River, Viggo and Ezra have shared rooms over the years-”

“Yeah, and it’s one thing if it’s *always* been that way, or if the age difference is only a few years. But Penny’s like seven years older than Asta, and she’s *never* had to share her bedroom before. It’s not fair of us to ask her to now just ’cause we wanted another kid. None of them even really wanted us to do this in the first place, and now not only are they going to have two more siblings when they didn’t even want one, we’re gonna be forcing them to give stuff up because of it?” He slumps back in his chair glumly. “They’re gonna be even *less* excited about the whole thing than they were to begin with.”

He’s right.

Our kids weren’t exactly giddy over the prospect of us bringing another baby into the house. Now we’re bringing two. And even though I know that they’ll all adjust to the idea in time, and they’ll love their new siblings once they’re born, I can’t just shrug it off and tell myself that they’ll be fine. That’s not fair to them. We need to be as sensitive to their feelings as possible, and I don’t think that forcing any of them to give up their bedroom counts as being sensitive.

“So what do you think we should do?” I finally ask, and he shrugs helplessly. “The only room in the house that we’re not using for anything is the guest house. Which isn’t technically *in* the house. We can’t move out there and leave the kids alone in the main house, and none of them are old enough to use it as their bedroom.”

“What about the movie room?” He suggests. “Don’t get me wrong, I love it, but it’s not like it’s a necessity. We have a huge TV in the family room-”
“I know, but the movie room is yours, it was a gift.”

“And I don’t mind re-gifting it to the babies.”

“What about moving?”

He frowns, setting his coffee down just as he was about to take another sip. “Like to a new house?”

“Yeah.”

“Where?”

“I don’t know… maybe there’s a slightly bigger house on the market somewhere else in the Hollywood Hills? Or we could look at places in Burbank-”

“No fucking way.” He objects immediately. “I wanted out of that place my whole life, I’m not moving back there voluntarily!”

“Okay, not Burbank.” I chuckle over his fervent protests.

“Do you seriously wanna move? I mean, it’s a giant headache, all the packing and unpacking, not to mention the actual house hunting and all the damn paperwork. Besides, you love our house. You wanted it the second you saw it.”

“I know.” I acknowledge somewhat sadly. I do love our house, and I don’t want to move. But if moving ends up being the option that makes the most sense for our burgeoning family, I’m just going to have to get over it. “It’s just a house. The people who live in it matter more.”

“I don’t know…”

I know it’s greedy of me, but I don’t want anyone to have to give up anymore than they absolutely have to. We have the money and the means to avoid any material sacrifices having to be made as a result of this unexpected twist. I see no point in not taking advantage of it.
“Well, it’s not like we have to decide right now. The babies are probably going to end up sleeping in our room for the first few months anyway, just so we don’t have to go traipsing back and forth through the house ten times a night for feedings and diaper changes. So we’ve basically still got a year to figure this all out.” Watching him heave a sigh of relief brings a genuine smile to my face. I pick up my coffee mug and hold it out towards his. “Here’s to the beginning of the craziest thing we’ll probably ever experience.”

He smirks as he gently taps the side of his mug against mine with an optimistic clink. “I shoulda seen it coming.”

“Seen what coming?”

“The insanity.” He replies bluntly, taking a sip of his drink. “You were involved, so no way in hell was this gonna go smoothly.”

“Ouch.” I force myself to pout pathetically, even though all I want to do right now is laugh.

“Truth hurts, dude.”

We try our best to relax and enjoy our drinks, but I think he’s struggling not to freak out just as much as I am. Besides, we know we need to get back to the kids sooner rather than later. And I doubt Lisa is going to let us leave without some kind of explanation for why we left her to babysit with only ten seconds notice. There’s really no way to avoid telling her the truth now. I can’t think of any excuses that actually sound plausible. Besides, we’re only four weeks away from the end of the first trimester. We may not have planned on telling anyone else for another month, but luckily we have plenty of experience when it comes to things not going according to our carefully laid plans.

Before we head back to the car, Tommy texts Lisa to find out where she wound up taking the kids. Turns out they ended up at the playground in Griffith Park, so Tommy and I arrange to meet them all there and trade back cars.

“What should we tell them?” Tommy asks as I guide Lisa’s car through the streets of Beverly Hills towards Hollywood.

“The kids?”
“Everyone.” He turns the radio down a little, giving me his full attention.

As if I have all the answers. “I don’t know.”

“I guess we’re gonna have to tell Lisa about everything now, right?”

“Probably. But we don’t have to tell the kids, if you don’t think we should yet.” I tell him as confidently as I can, though I’m not sure that I actually believe we can get away with keeping this secret from them any longer than we have. “We can just tell them that…”

“That…?” He quirks a curious eyebrow at me, almost challenging me to finish my sentence with a viable plan.

If only I had one. “That you had an allergic reaction to something you ate at breakfast, and I had to take you to the emergency room to get one of those… epidural shots.”

He laughs out loud, and it sends a wave of warmth throughout my whole body. I honestly can’t remember the last time I heard him laugh like that, like he couldn’t hold it in for even a second longer and it just burst out of his mouth.

“Epidural? Was I giving birth to my allergic reaction or something?”

“You know what I mean! Just ‘cause I can’t remember the exact word.”

“It’s epi nephrine.”

“Fine. You had to get an epi nephrine shot.”

“I probably did look pretty fucking pale when we left that diner....” He muses, weighing the potential pros and cons of my poorly thought out lie.
“I totally think we could get away with it.”

“But what am I allergic to? I didn’t eat anything today that they haven’t seen me eat like a thousand times before.”

Crap. “Um… okay, maybe it wasn’t an allergic reaction. Maybe it was food poisoning?”

“Who the fuck goes to the ER for food poisoning?!” He exclaims through amused chuckles. “Jeez, I thought you were supposed to be good at lying.”

“I’m out of practice!”

“We could tell them I got stung by a bee at the diner, and I’m allergic to bee stings?” He suggests with a half-hearted shrug.

“Sounds plausible. Except that you got stung by a bee at the beach last summer, and other than whining about it a whole lot, you didn’t have a bad reaction to it.”

“I wasn’t whining, it fucking hurt!” He folds his arms petulantly across his chest. “Shit… we’re gonna have to tell them the truth, aren’t we?”

“Some version of it.” I concede reluctantly.

“What if something goes wrong, though? What if we tell them that Shauntae’s pregnant, and then…” He takes a breath, turning his face away from mine so that I can no longer see his expression. Unfortunately for him, I can see his reflection in the window beside him, so I can see how scared he looks.

“I honestly believe that won’t happen. I don’t know why, but seeing them today, hearing their heartbeats… I just have a good feeling, like everything is going to be okay.” I reach over to place a reassuring hand on his thigh. “But if it’s not… we’ll find a way to explain that to them.”

Judging by his silence, I don’t think he believes me. And I don’t push it, because I doubt there’s anything I could say to convince him. But I meant every word I said. I do believe that our babies will
be okay, and I do believe that we will survive if they’re not. I’m not foolish enough to believe that it will be easy, or painless. I know it’ll be one of the most excruciating things either of us has ever been through. But we’ve both suffered losses before, and we’ve dealt with them and come out stronger. Even our kids have already been through one of the worst things that will ever happen to them, possibly the worst thing.

We’re all still standing. And there’s no doubt in my mind that we’ll stay standing as long as we’re together. Call me idealistic, call me naïve…

But there is absolutely no evidence to contradict the faith I have in my family.
Still trying to get back into the swing of writing after not really being able to for the last couple of months. Only have 2 more chapters written beyond this one, so I promise I'll work on getting another one finished before I update again! I don't want to fall behind and make you guys wait even longer between chapters than I already do.

We've been to the playground at Griffith Park dozens of times since the kids and I moved to L.A. a few years ago. We've made plenty of memories here, even though not every visit was especially memorable. But the first memory that comes to mind when I think about this place, the only memory that comes to mind whenever we pull into this parking lot and open our car doors to the sounds of excited children, is the very first one we ever made.

It was the day I first introduced Tommy to my children. Now our children, though neither of us could have ever imagined that would be the case back then. That day I knew that I wanted him to be a part of their lives somehow. It was one of the most important moments in our relationship. Maybe even one of the most important moments of my life.

And I think that what’s about to happen here is quite possibly going to give that moment and that memory a run for its money.

“Ready?” I ask as the two of us stare out of the windshield of Lisa’s care at the bustling playground
just across the parking lot.

“Does that actually matter?”

It seems like it should. But if we wait until we’re both ready to do this, the twins will be breaking the news to everyone themselves!

“It’ll be great.” I tell him, forcing a smile for good measure. “It’s good news, and everyone’s gonna be excited.”

“Liar.”

“It is good news!”

“Yeah, but I’m not gonna go over there thinking everyone’s gonna be jumping for joy about it. That’s what we thought when we told the kids we wanted to have a baby, and that didn’t exactly go the way we hoped.”

“True…”

“Maybe we shouldn’t tell the kids. Not here, anyway.”

“You wanna wait until we get them home?” I ask, wondering if he’s chickening out on telling them at all today. Not that I’d blame him.

“I just think it’d be better if we weren’t in public when we break the news to them.” The man has a point. “I’m not trying to be a little shit about it; it’s not like I want things to go badly.” He sighs wearily. “I just don’t wanna convince myself that it’s gonna go great, you know? I’d rather just…”

“Prepare for the worst so you won’t be disappointed if the worst actually happens?”

“Basically.”
My mouth curls into a faint smile as I turn my head to meet his eyes. “Since when does that ever work?”

“Oh… never.” He concedes with a small smirk.

“If you wanna wait to tell the kids, we can. But we still have to tell your mom and Lisa something.”

With a grudging roll of his eyes, he unbuckles his seatbelt. “Come on. Let’s get this over with.”

We both take deep breaths and open our doors, stepping out of the car and into the gentle afternoon breeze. It only takes us a moment to spot Lisa, Dia and David relaxing on a bench within view of the playground, and as we make our way over to them, I catch sight of Ezra keeping an eye on his siblings and Bridget while they swing from monkey bars and climb up slides. He spots us, too, but rather than heading straight over to us to find out where we went and what’s going on, he stays where he is. I smile and wave to him, coaxing a relieved smile onto his lips as he briefly lifts a hand to wave back at me. And then he’s almost immediately distracted by Asta demanding his attention.

And I’m quickly distracted by the sensation of Tommy’s fingers blindly grasping for my own. I glance down for a second to make sure I wasn’t imagining it, and sure enough, his hand is now locked tightly with mine.

“There you are!” Exclaims Lisa when she spots us approaching. “We were starting to worry.”

“I started worrying the minute you left.” Dia amends, her eyes flitting back and forth between the two of us, trying to read our expressions and decide whether or not worrying is still necessary. “What’s going on? Did something happen?”

“Oh… yes and no.” Tommy replies with a nervous chuckle, turning his attention to Lisa. “I guess we owe you an explanation.”

She shrugs, feigning disinterest. “Only if you feel like it. I mean I did loan you my car at a moments notice, and spend my Sunday afternoon babysitting your five kids, but—”

“Why’re you trying to fucking guilt me into telling you something I just offered to tell you?” He
snarks back at her. “My five kids could come over here any minute now, and then you’ll never know where we were or what we were doing.”

“So maybe we should just let you do the talking.” Suggests David as soon as Lisa opens her mouth to fire back with what was more than likely another sassy retort.

“Please.” Adds Dia, her tone tinged with lingering anxiety.

Tommy looks at me, as though he’s asking permission to divulge the truth, or maybe checking to see if I want the honor of doing it myself. I snake my arm around his waist and peck him lightly on the lips. “Go for it.”

“Okay, well… you remember when we were all over at mom’s house for brunch right after we got back from Tulsa this summer?”

“Yeah…” Lisa frowns, clearly bewildered by the question, and by what that day could possible have to do with today. “What about it?”

“Viggo told you that we were gonna have a baby, and then we told you that we’d thought about it and decided not to do it?”

I try to keep a straight face as I watch Lisa look from Tommy to me, then to Dia, and finally to David, gauging each of our expressions, trying to decide if this is a joke. “What’re you saying?”

“We changed our minds.” I shrug nonchalantly.

“Again.”

“What?” Her hand automatically flies to her mouth in surprise. “Are you serious?”

“We’re serious.” I confirm. “Our surrogate is about eight weeks pregnant.”

“Oh my god!”
“Congratulations!” Beams David as Lisa hurries forward to wrap us both in an over-excited hug.

“Is Shauntay okay?” Dia questions impatiently. “Is that why you had to leave so suddenly, because something was wrong?”

“No.” He assures her quickly. “I mean yes, we left because we thought something was wrong. But the doctor did an ultrasound, and it looks like everything’s okay.”

“Thank god.” She sighs, her hand closing tightly around the gold crucifix hanging from a delicate chain around her neck.

“That’s not everything, though.” Tommy adds, bringing concerned frowns back to his family’s faces. “When the doctor did the ultrasound, she kinda found... something.”

“What do you mean, ‘something’?” Asks Lisa curiously. “You just said everything was okay.”

“It is.” I confirm, struggling to keep my smile under control as I gently nudge Tommy with my hip. “Tell them.”

“I don’t know… I’m kinda enjoying this too much.”

Dia scowls at him, like only a mother can. “You can’t keep people in suspense about this sort of thing! It’s cruel!”

“Okay, alright.” He grumbles in exaggerated annoyance. “Jeez, you’re no fun.”

“Tommy-”

“We’re having twins.”

“Very funny.” Lisa shakes her head at him. “Now how about you tell us what’s actually going on?”
“I just fucking did!” He exclaims, turning to me for backup. “You tell them. No one fucking listens to me.”

“He’s not kidding.” I smirk as I watch the realization dawn on each of them, their mouths falling open one by one.

“But I thought she already had an ultrasound a couple of weeks ago.” Dia points out in confusion. “How did they not see that it was twins then?”

“I guess it happens sometimes.” Tommy shrugs. “Like, not a lot, but she said that one twin can kinda ‘hide’ behind the other, especially this early, ‘cause they’re so small.”

“Wow…” Gasps Lisa in awe. “I can’t believe it… twins?”

“Yup.” I laugh softly. “Trust me, we had pretty much the same reaction.”

“Yeah, only take whatever you’re feeling and multiply it by like ten, ‘cause it’s not happening to you.”

Dia steps forward and pulls Tommy into a hug, and I can see the tears in her eyes as she looks at me over his shoulder. “This is incredible.”

“You’re gonna have seven kids.” Adds Lisa dazedly, still shaking her head in disbelief.

“And I thought you were crazy for having five!” David laughs. “I seriously don’t know how you guys do it.”

“It’s a skill.” I tease.

“Well, you’re going to need to be pretty damn skilled to handle seven.” Lisa snorts, taking the opportunity to hug her brother again once Dia finally lets him go. “I gotta say… I am going to enjoy this so much.”
“Don’t be a bitch.” He mutters as he half-heartedly returns her embrace. “You’re just jealous.”

“Jealous of what?” Asks River inquisitively, causing all five of us to jump in surprise when we turn around to find him and Viggo standing right behind us.

“Uh…”

“That it’s my birthday.” Tommy replies quickly, trying to smile through his nerves. “And that I’m so much younger and prettier than she is.”

“You’re not pretty.” Viggo snorts in amusement. “You’re a boy, you gotta be handsome.”

“Dude, how many times do we have to have the whole ‘boys can be pretty’ conversation before it actually sticks?”

Viggo gives an unconcerned shrug. “If you wanna be pretty, you can be pretty. But I think it’s weird.”

“Yeah? Well, I think your face is weird.” Tommy shoots back childishly, lunging at Viggo, who squeals with laughter as he takes off across the playground.

“You really wanna raise more kids with that?” Lisa asks me with a knowing smile.

As my eyes follow Tommy and Viggo, I can feel my lips spread into a grin so wide that it almost hurts. River is in close pursuit, and the three of them duck and weave around swing sets, jungle gyms, and innocent bystanders. It’s not long before Ezra, Penny, Asta and Bridget notice them charging around the playground, and they don’t wait for an invitation to join in whatever game it is they’re playing. One minute it looks as though Tommy is the one doing the chasing, but the next it appears that the tables have turned. Suddenly he’s the one fleeing while all six track him like a pack of wolves hunting their prey. And when their prey is too tired to keep up the pace, they pounce on him, tackling him onto the grass where they land in a giggling heap.

“Definitely.”
Tommy is eventually allowed to go free, and he joins the rest of us adults on the benches at the side of the playground. I’d expected Lisa to want to leave as soon as she had her car back, or for Dia to need to go home and rest, but everyone seems more than content to relax and enjoy the sunshine. No one so much as suggests calling it a day until Asta comes over to inform us that she’s thirsty. And of course, once one of them starts whining, it’s only a matter of time before the others notice how thirsty, or tired, or in need of a restroom they are.

It’s late afternoon when we say our goodbyes to Tommy’s family and head home. I spend most of the drive trying to think of the best way to explain everything to the kids. Or rather, how to explain it to them so that they’ll be excited about it. I can’t help thinking about their reactions when we told them we were planning to have another baby; the complaints about how cramped the car is already, the less than pleased expressions on their faces. And though Ezra has since come around to the idea enough to be supportive of it, I don’t know if the fact that we’re now having two babies instead of one is going to change that.

But I guess we’re about to find out.

“Hey, guys, before you go anywhere, Tommy and I need to talk to you about something.” I tell them as I open the front door and let them into the house.

“Is everything okay?” Ezra asks, his eyes meeting mine.

“Yeah, it’s fine.”

I feel terrible that he’s had to wait until now to hear the news. He knows that Shauntae is pregnant, so I’m sure he assumed that something was wrong with the baby when Tommy and I took off during brunch. But he couldn’t ask us while his siblings were following him around everywhere. I tried to smile at him every time he looked my way at the playground, so that hopefully he’d at least know not to worry. But that’s still no substitute for a full explanation.

The five of them follow us into the family room, draping themselves wearily across every spare inch of seating, leaving the two of us with only an ottoman to sit on. Even though there’s enough room for us to both fit comfortably on it, Tommy still sits closer to me than necessary, and I give his knee a supportive squeeze as we both take deep breaths and turn to face our the expectant looks of our kids.

“What’s going on?” Penny frowns. “Are we in trouble?”
“I didn’t do it!” River earnestly pleads his innocence. “I swear!”

Tommy quirks an eyebrow at him. “Do what?”

“Whatever you think I did.”

“We don’t think you did anything.” I tell him, chuckling to myself as he visibly relaxes once more. “Nothing is wrong and no one is in any trouble.” I hope. “It’s good news…”

“It’s about Shauntae.”

Viggo frowns in confusion. “Shauntae?”

“You remember how we told you awhile ago that Shauntae was going to help us have a baby?” I ask, trying to keep my tone light and hopeful. They all nod slowly, all except Ezra who has already heard this part of the speech. “Well… she’s pregnant.”

The room is quiet for a moment. A long moment. Their expressions range from pensive to mildly unimpressed, but none of them look especially disappointed by the news, so I suppose that counts for something.

“Cool!” Ezra smiles in an obvious attempt to encourage a similarly enthusiastic response from his younger siblings. “When is the baby gonna be born?”

“Uh… next June.” Tommy replies nervously.

“Is it a boy?” River asks, though it sounds a little less like a question and more like a demand.

“We don’t know yet.”

“I want it to be a boy.”
“No, I want a girl baby!” Asta snaps back at him before turning to us. “Can it please be a girl baby?”

“You can’t choose if it’s a girl or a boy.” Penny explains gently. “It just happens. Mommy always said that God gives people the baby they’re meant to have, when they’re meant to have it.”

“You get what you get, and you don’t throw a fit.” Viggo reminds her. “But I hope god gives me another brother.”

“You don’t even believe in god.” Smirks Ezra, to which Viggo simply shrugs.

Wow.

This is going a hell of a lot better than I expected. It’s a shame we’re not done divulging yet, because this would have be a great time to offer them something made of sugar and send them off to enjoy what’s left of their Sunday afternoon.

“Listen, guys, there’s something else we need to tell you.” Tommy announces before they get too distracted from the original conversation.

“Is it about the baby?” Asks Ezra, his smile fading a little.

“Yeah…”

“Actually…” Here goes nothing. “It’s about the babies.”

“What babies?” Penny frowns.

“We went with Shauntae to see the doctor today, and when the doctor was looking to see if the baby was doing okay, she found out that Shauntae is pregnant with two babies, not one like we thought.”

“Is one of them hers and one of them ours?” Viggo asks in confusion. “Like we’re sharing?”
“No, dude. We’re not sharing them with anyone!” Tommy laughs as I bite my lip to stifle my own amusement. “They’re both ours; they’re twins.”

“What’s twins mean?” Asks Asta.

I knew there was something I forgot to figure out how to explain! “Uh… well…”

“Most of the time when a woman gets pregnant, she only gets pregnant with one baby.” Tommy jumps in quickly. “But sometimes when a woman gets pregnant, she gets pregnant with two babies, and they’re called twins.”

“My friend Tyler has a twin sister.” Viggo informs us proudly.

“No he doesn’t.” River scoffs, rolling his eyes. “Twins have to both be boys or both be girls, that’s just how it works.”

“Is not!”

“Viggo’s right.” I cut them off before a bickering match ensues. “There are two kinds of twins. There’s the kind that comes from different eggs, and they can both be boys or girls, or one boy and one girl. And then there’s the kind that come from the same egg, and they’re called identical twins because they’re exactly the same.”

“There are identical twin in my class at school.” Penny pipes up excitedly. “Except they’re not really identical, because Savannah has a mole on her elbow and Sierra doesn’t. But if you can’t see their elbows, you can’t tell who’s who right away. People always get them mixed up.”

“What kind of twins are we getting?” Asks Asta excitedly. “Are they the same or different?”

“They’re the same.” Tommy smiles at her. “So they’ll both be boys or both be girls, and they’ll look almost exactly the same, like Penny’s friends.”
“They’re not my friends.” She corrects him adamantly. “They’re always talking about how cool the Kardashians are, and they think I’m lame because I like Taylor Swift. I mean… really?”

“Right… sorry, my bad.”

Is that… it?

That can’t be it.

Where’s the whining and the pouting? Where are all of the questions about how this will impact them, and what they’ll have to give up to make room for two babies instead of one? Maybe we should’ve given them more credit. It’s not like they’re selfish kids, they’re so far from being self-centered (especially compared to some of the brats they go to school with). But it wouldn’t have been all that selfish or unreasonable of them to be upset about this turn of events, at least at first. It’s a big deal, and it’s going to change all of our lives in a big way. They’re entitled to be dubious about it.

But… they’re not. Not that I can tell.

“So… everyone’s okay with this?” I ask with trepidation, glancing back and forth between each of their little faces. “I know that when Tommy and I told you we wanted to have another baby, there was some... “ How do I put this nicely? “Concern about how a new baby might change things.”

“It’s okay with me so long as they don’t touch my stuff.” River stipulates seriously. “And we get a bigger car, like you promised.”

“I don’t think the bigger car was promised…” But now it’s going to be necessary, so… “We’ll definitely look into it.”

I notice Penny staring off into space, and if it wasn’t for the thoughtful expression on her face, I would assume she wasn’t even paying attention to the conversation anymore. “Pen? Something on your mind?”

“I was just wondering where the babies are going to sleep? We don’t have any extra bedrooms.”
Tommy chuckles softly, shooting an ‘I told you so’ look my way. “We’re not sure yet, but we’ve got plenty of time to figure all that stuff out.”

“Can I keep them in my room?” Asta begs eagerly. “I can take care of them.”

“That’s really sweet, Bug, but they’re probably gonna cry a lot, and you won’t be able to sleep.”

Her face falls, excitement giving way to sadness. “Why will they cry a lot?”

“Because babies cry all the time.” River tells her, already annoyed by the idea. “They cry ‘cause they’re hungry, or ‘cause they’re sleepy, or ‘cause they pooped their diaper-“

“Ew!”

“You pooped your diaper.” Viggo points out smugly. “A lot.”

“Did not!”

“Did too!”

“Did not!”

“Okay, I think we’re getting a little off topic.” I interrupt them, briefly struggling to remember what the topic even was. “But River is right, babies do cry a lot, and they need a lot of love and attention. I know you guys are all going to be awesome big brothers and sisters, because you already love each other so much.” I choose to ignore the fact that, as I’m saying this, Asta is trying to push Viggo off of the couch with her feet. “Having a new baby was already going to be a big change, so having two is going to be even bigger. But it’s going to be a good change, I promise.”

Maybe I shouldn’t promise something like that, but I’m sure enough of what I’ve just said to swear it. I know that it will be hard, and stressful, and completely exhausting. But I also know that it’s going to be so completely worth it.
It’s not long before the kids disperse throughout the house, all of them far more preoccupied with their own activities and interests than the life altering news we’ve shared with them. That’s one of the perks of being a child, I suppose. Nothing is all that real to you unless it’s happening right now. You don’t know how to plan for or stress over something that’s so far in the future. Two weeks is like an eternity to them, so seven months isn’t really something they can fathom. If we made a calendar of the days until the baby is due, like the ones they made when Tommy and I were on tour, it would look like years to them rather than mere months.

The excitement of checking off the days would probably wane for them before the end of the first trimester!

“That went better than expected.” I note thankfully, handing Tommy one of the glasses of water that I fetched from the kitchen and taking a seat beside him on the couch.

“Right? No meltdowns, no pouting, no silent treatment… those were the same kids we had the whole baby conversation with a few months ago, right?”

“The very same.” I smile as he relaxes beside me and I feel the weight of his body leaning against mine. “I don’t know… maybe they’ve just had enough time to get used to the idea?”

“Yeah, of one baby.” He points out. “Then we’re all like, ‘by the way, it’s two babies now, no biggie’.”

“I probably is ‘no biggie’ to them. I mean, not compared to how big of a deal it was for us. I don’t know that they can really wrap their heads around the idea of twins.”

“Oh, and we can?”

“Touche.”

He takes a long, slow breath, his head rolling tiredly away from my shoulder and resting against the couch cushion behind him as he gazes up at the ceiling thoughtfully. I want to ask him what’s on his mind, but I get the feeling that he wouldn’t be able to answer. There’s probably too much going on in there right now, and all I’ll do by breaking this comfortable quiet is disturb his attempts to sift through it all and make some kind of sense of it.
Besides, this is probably the calmest moment we’ve shared all weekend. Between the fighting, and the fear of losing the baby, and then the shock of finding out we’re having twins, and the stress of telling our family… it has been a crazy twenty-four hours.

“I wish we’d asked Doctor O’Conner for a picture of the ultrasound. Or at least taken crappy videos of it on our phones.”

“I know. I think we were all a little too stunned to think of it at the time. And it wasn’t a scheduled appointment, so she probably figured she’d just give us an official picture at the next scan.”

“I guess. I just… wanna see it again.” He mumbles almost bashfully. “It’s like I only half believe it actually happened.”

“Same here.” I agree, wrapping my arm around him and pulling him close. He snuggles against me, causing the faint smile on my face to automatically widen. “But it did happen. It is happening.”

“We’re having twins.”

“Uh huh.”

“Are we just totally fucking screwed?” He chuckles, tilting his head back to look at me.

I brush my lips lightly across his, and he exhales a pathetic, perfect little whimper the second they lose contact. “There’s no one else I’d rather be screwed with.”

“Or by?”

“That too.”

“Hey… I’m sorry I was such an asshole last night. And this morning.” He apologizes ashamedly. “And just… in general. I never meant to push you away.”

I open my mouth to point out that, yes, he did mean to. He may not have done it maliciously, I know
he never intended to hurt me, but he did intend to keep me at a distance. Not being honest with me about what was going on here and how it was making him feel was a conscious decision he made, it wasn’t something that just happened. But it doesn’t matter anymore, not really. It’s all out in the open now, and he knows that I respect the fact that he isn’t ready to talk about certain things, that he can’t.

I have barely twelve hours left with him before I have to head back to the airport again, and I want to spend them like this. Defenses down and air cleared.

“You don’t need to apologize. I get it.”

“I just wish I’d handled it differently.”

“Me too.” I wholeheartedly agree as I lean down and place another kiss to his pouting lips.

“So… we’re good now?”

“Yeah, we’re good.”

“Does that mean…” He looks up at me, and I can see a flicker of flirtation burn in his dark brown eyes. “I get birthday sex tonight?”

I laugh out loud, stroking a few strands of hair away from his face before kissing him eagerly. “How about some birthday makeup sex?”

“Even better!”
This is going to sound meaningless at this point, but I truly am sorry for how long the wait between chapters is. :( I swear that not a day goes by that I don't think about this fic and about the fact that I need to write more. But... life. A lot has happened in the last few months, good and bad, and it has all taken its toll.

I'm almost 4 months pregnant, which I'm SO happy about. But months 2 & 3 of my pregnancy were 24/7 nausea, and I couldn't look at a computer screen without it getting worse, so I did ZERO writing during that time. And then I barely got over that when my 16 year old dog fell ill. He deteriorated quickly, and I spent most of the last couple of weeks taking care of him before we were sadly forced to put him to sleep a few days ago.

Anyway, I promise I AM trying to get some writing done. And I am incredibly grateful to anyone who hasn't given up on this fic and for your patience. <3

We're officially over halfway done with this goddamn tour.
Just two and a half more weeks to go, and then Taylor will finally be home for more than forty-eight hours at a time, and I can go back to not being a shitty single parent. If I wasn’t too fucking exhausted to have emotions, I’d be downright giddy. But as I understand it, being giddy requires you to like… smile, and be cheerful, and have a spring in your step or whatever.

I don’t have time for any of that shit.

I don’t really have time for anything besides being my version of a domestic goddess. And even when I do have time, see above comment regarding exhaustion. I’m drinking about as much coffee per day as Taylor, at this point. I feel like an addict most mornings; I roll out of bed before my eyes are fully open, zombie walk my way down to the kitchen, and start a full pot of coffee. The whole thing is gone by noon. Whatever I don’t drink between waking up and leaving the house to take the kids to school is poured into the largest travel mug we own and carried everywhere for the rest of the morning. And the worst part is, I think I’m building up a tolerance to it, because one pot a day is no longer enough. Yesterday I stopped by Starbucks and got myself a grande coffee on my way to pick the kids up. Tomorrow it will likely be a venti. Next week, who knows? Maybe I’ll be drinking coffee at dinner.

Taylor would be so proud.

But it’s okay. Because in seventeen days, he’ll be home, and I can go back to drinking a normal, healthy amount of caffeine, and sleeping through the night, and not having to do every-damn-thing myself. Our life can go back to normal. Or as normal as our life ever seems to get. You know, until the twins are born, and then our life will probably never resemble normal again.

I’m kind of okay with that, though. Any version of normal or abnormal is okay with me as long as we’re living it together.

Whatcha doin?

Jesus, he’s such a loser.

I smile to myself as I swipe to unlock my phone screen and reply to his text. These pointless little conversations we randomly have throughout the day are what keeps me going. That, and the coffee.

At the vet so Duke can get his shots.
My text has barely had time to go through before the little bubble pops up on screen to let me know that he’s typing a response. I kinda love that bubble. Sometimes it’s hours between when I send a text and when he has a chance to reply. Seeing “delivered” or “seen” under my sent messages makes me cranky. But when I see that little bubble and know that another text from him is only seconds away, it’s such a huge comfort. It makes me feel heard, I guess, even if what we’re texting about is nothing important.

_Aww, poor puppy. :o(

_And I feel bad for the dog, too. ;o)_

I roll my eyes at his lame joke, exhaling a quiet chuckle that was apparently loud enough for the receptionist to hear. She glances up at me from her computer monitor, smirking at me as I return my attention to the texts on screen.

_Cute._

Again, my text has only just gone through when I receive a reply. It’s nice to know that he’s as pathetically desperate to talk to me as I am to talk to him.

_I try._

Yeah, don’t I fucking know it.

_Too hard, loser. :p_

_So what’re you up to? Win anything on the slots yet?_

I already know the answer to that. He hates Vegas as much as I do. I think it may have been cool when I was like twenty-one or something, but the novelty wore off pretty fast after the first visit. Now the only thing Vegas has going for it is the freedom to drink alcohol while walking down the street at eleven o’clock in the morning. But even that’s tainted by the hoards of tourists _every-fucking-where_.

_Haha no. We’ve been doing promo stuff all day. Which is way more fun, IMO._
While I’m in the middle of texting him back, our conversation suddenly disappears from the screen and is replaced by an incoming call from my mom. It’s not totally unusual for her to call me, especially not since she got sick. But it still takes me by surprise, and for some reason I hesitate before pressing the button to accept the call.

“Hey, what’s up?”

“Hi sweetheart. You’re not busy, are you?”

If I was busy, I wouldn’t have answered. But I’ve told her that so many times already, and it never seems to register. It’s a waste of breath, so now I just stick with, “Nope”.

“Good.” She takes a deep breath, and it feels like my whole body freezes. More like everything in this room. Maybe even everything on the planet. “Listen, I don’t want you to worry…”

Then don’t say that! “Worry about what? What’s wrong?”

“I haven’t been feeling too good the last couple of days. My doctor wants me to get checked out, just to be on the safe side, so I’m about to head over to the hospital.”

“Do you need me to take you?”

“No, no. It’s not worth you coming all the way out here just for this. Besides, the kids get out of school soon, don’t they?”

“I can figure something out.”

“I appreciate the offer, honey, but I’ll just drive over there myself.” She insists dismissively. “Like I said, my doctor is just playing it safe. The chemo makes me more susceptible to viruses and infections, so he just wants to rule that out.”

“Okay, well… can you call me or text me when you get the all clear?”
"Of course. I was just going to wait and call you when I knew something, but I know you would have been upset with me for not keeping you in the loop."

Damn right. "Thanks."

"I’ll talk to you soon. Try not to worry, okay?"

"Yeah, okay."

Fat chance.

In fact, I’m so busy worrying that I don’t reply to Taylor’s last text. Not that it required a response. I wait around for the vet tech to bring Duke back from getting his vaccinations, and pay whatever it was they told me it cost (I wasn’t paying attention, they could’ve billed me for millions for all I know). I’m so distracted on the drive over to the kid’s school that I totally miss the turn, and it’s several blocks before I realize my mistake. The kids are so busy chatting away to each other on the drive over to Asta’s pre-school that none of them really address me at all. Which is probably for the best. I don’t think I can hold a conversation, and drive, and stress out right now.

I’m no fucking good at multi-tasking, that’s Taylor’s department.

I went grocery shopping this morning with the intention of actually preparing a decent meal for us all tonight. Well… as decent of a meal as I’m capable of throwing together, at least. It was going to be homemade, and I figured that had to count for something. But now I just can’t be fucking bothered with chopping and boiling and baking. So pizza it is. Again. Thankfully, the kids don’t seem to mind. I’m willing to bet they could have pizza every night for a month, and as long as the toppings were never the same two nights in a row, they wouldn’t complain.

Every few minutes or so, I find myself checking my phone and resisting the urge to call my mom. She said she’d call me when she had news, so there’s no point in me harassing her when she probably doesn’t know anything yet. I can’t decide if no news is good news in this situation, though.

Finally, just after seven, my phone rings. But it’s not my mom calling this time, it’s Lisa. I leave the kids watching a movie in the family room and head into the kitchen to answer.

“Lisa?”
“Hey.” I don’t remember the last time I heard a less cheerful ‘hey’. I can already tell that something is wrong just from that one word, but I’m afraid to ask what it is. “Mom asked me to call you.”

“Why?” I swallow the painfully dry lump in my throat. “Where is she?”

“She’s getting ready for bed.”

At seven o’clock in the evening? She’s not that old. “So she’s at home?”

“Yeah, we just got back.”

“Back from where? The hospital?” I ask in confusion, trying to put the pieces together. “She told me she was going alone.”

“She was.” Lisa sighs sadly. “I mean, she did. But she had to wait on some tests, and I didn’t want her to be alone, so I had David drop me off there about an hour ago.”

“Okay… so… is she okay? What did the doctor say?” She doesn’t respond, but I can hear her take another unsteady breath, so I know she’s still there. “Lis-”

“It’s… not good.”

My hand instinctively reaches out for something solid to grab onto, and luckily I’m close enough to the kitchen counter to be able to use it for support. “Why? What’s wrong?”

“They did some scans, and they found…” Fuck, Lisa, just say it. “There were some mets in her liver.”

“I don’t know what the fuck that means, Lis, I’m not a medical professional!”

“It means that the cancer has spread.” She explains tearfully. “It’s in her liver now.”
Shit.

“So… you’re saying she has liver cancer?”

“No, it’s not liver cancer.”

“But you just told me that they found cancer in her liver!”

“I know, but it’s not liver cancer. It’s metastatic ovarian cancer.”

This doesn’t make any fucking sense! “But she doesn’t even have ovaries anymore! They removed them months ago!”

“It’s just… it’s what it’s called, Tommy.” She snaps, and I instantly feel like a total jackass for bitching at her over something so irrelevant. “The cancer didn’t start in her liver, it spread there. It’s still part of the original cancer, even if the original cancer was removed. It had already started spreading when they did the surgery. And because they couldn’t remove it all, and the chemo hasn’t been working the way they expected it to, it’s still spreading.”

“Does she have to have more surgery?” There’s muffled crying on the other end of the line, and my grip on the countertop tightens until it hurts. “Lisa, talk to me.”

“It’s really h-hard for them to treat cancer when it spreads to the liver.”

“Why?”

“It just is.” She sobs helplessly.

I wish I didn’t need her to break this down into non-medical professional terms for me when it’s clearly the last thing she wants to do. But she works in a hospital and I don’t. I have no fucking clue what half of the stuff the doctors say means, but she hears shit like this every day, she understands it. And as tired as I’m sure they all are of dumbing it down for me, I’m just as tired of feeling totally fucking clueless.
“Her doctor is coming up with a new treatment plan. They might operate, but given the fact that they haven’t been able to stop the cancer from spreading, and how hard it is to remove cancer from the liver, he didn’t seem too confident.”

“So we’ll get a doctor who is confident.”

“It doesn’t work like that. It’s not like he doesn’t know how to do it, he’s not incompetent. If he doesn’t want to operate, it’s because he doesn’t think it’s worth the risk.”

All I want to do right now is throw my damn phone at the wall. Why the hell does some doctor get to decide if it’s worth trying to save my mom’s life?! “Of course it’s worth the risk!”

“Not if the surgery damages the liver even more and makes things worse.”

“Well… then… what about a transplant?” I suggest desperately, sickened by the thought that we’re right back where we were five years ago, searching for a way to save one of our parents from dying because of a shitty liver. “If they can’t fix her liver, we’ll find her another one. I mean… maybe one of us is a match!”

“Tommy-”

“What? Isn’t it worth asking?”

“Even if they were willing to do it, there’s a good chance the cancer cells will just spread all over again. If not to the liver, then to somewhere else. This new chemo they’ve been giving her isn’t working any better than the last one… we’re just running in circles and it’s getting us nowhere.”

“So… what now? Are we supposed to just give up and watch her die?”

“Of course not!” She cries, clearly horrified by the thought. And yet, somehow, I feel like she’s been thinking the exact same thing. “We just have to wait and see what her doctor says. He’ll tell us what our best options are once he’s had time to talk it over with the rest of her treatment team, and… we’ll go from there.”
Great.

Because they’ve done such a stellar job of helping her so far! “Are you staying with her tonight?”

“I offered, but she told me there’s no need.” She sighs sadly. “She said she’s just going to sleep, and she doesn’t need company for that.”

“She’s so fucking stubborn.”

“That’s what I told her. Only without the cussing.”

“She shouldn’t be alone.”

“I agree. But she wants to be, at least for tonight. You can call her in the morning and see if she wants you to come by then.”

“Okay.” I mumble grudgingly. “Are you ‘okay’? I know that’s a stupid question, but…”

“I’m…” She pauses, searching for a suitable word to sum up whatever it is she’s feeling. “Scared. I’m really fucking scared.”

Me too.

I can’t bring myself to go back to watching a movie with the kids. I’m afraid that if I go in there, they’ll be able to see that something is wrong just by the look on my face. I even stand in the middle of the kitchen and try to smile a couple of times, to prove to myself that I can fake being okay, but it’s like I can’t make my lips do what I want them to. I try to curl the corners up and some invisible force drags them right back down. If I fight against it, it makes them tremble. Either way, I’m totally unconvincing when it comes to playing the part of a guy without a care in the world. So I spend an hour or so sitting out on the kitchen terrace in the dark, just… trying to breathe.

Taylor called me about half an hour after Lisa and I said goodbye, but I let it go to voicemail. Then he texted me and asked if I was okay. I forced myself to text back “yeah, why?”, which I shouldn’t have done, because he then informed me that Lisa had just called him and filled him in on
everything. Guess I should’ve fucking seen that coming. I stared at the screen for a few minutes, trying to come up with a response. But I didn’t know what I was supposed to say. And I knew it was getting close to showtime for him, anyway.

Even if I’d known where to begin, I didn’t want to start something we couldn’t finish.

I think Ezra can tell that something’s bothering me, because when it’s time to get Asta and Viggo ready for bed, he ends up being the one who takes charge and makes sure they brush their teeth and put their pajamas on. I mostly just follow them around as a reminder that there’s still a parent present. Even if I am a totally ineffectual one right now.

Once all five of the kids are finally down for the night, I retreat to my own bed, crawl onto it fully clothed, and then just… lie there. It’s dark, and quiet, like some kind of sensory deprivation. I heard that’s supposed to reduce stress and relieve pain or something, but it’s not really working all that well. I try closing my eyes, to block out any small amount of light in the room, I try taking slow, deep breaths and letting my whole body relax into the comforter and pillows beneath me. I imagine I’m floating, I’m not sure if it’s in water or thin air, but I try to make my mind believe that my body is weightless.

But it’s not.

I’m not.

I haven’t felt this physically and emotionally heavy since Taylor was in the hospital almost three years ago. It was the worst few days of my life, without question. I never wanted to feel that way again, and I was sure I never would as long as nothing happened to him.

I wish he was here.

Actually, I wish I wasn’t here.

I shouldn’t be here.

I should be with my mom. I don’t care if she says she doesn’t need anyone to be with her tonight. I feel like shit, lying here, picturing her wide awake in bed. Alone and afraid. Then again, maybe she’d rather be alone. If I were her, and my only options were to have me around or be by myself, I
know which one I’d choose.

Unfortunately, I don’t get a fucking choice. I’m stuck with me.

It wouldn’t be so bad if I could just fucking sleep. Or if I could drink until I pass out. But I can’t get my mind to stop racing long enough to so much as take a nap. And since I’m the only adult on the premises, drinking myself unconscious is not an option. Which means I’m probably doomed to spend the rest of the night lying here, staring at the ceiling, hating everyone and everything.

I don’t understand why this is happening. She doesn’t deserve this. Our family doesn’t deserve this. Hell, I’m not exactly my own biggest fan, I’m more like my own worst enemy. And speaking as my own worst enemy, I wouldn’t wish this on me!

Bridget wasn’t even conceived when my dad died, and now my mom might die before Bridget starts Kindergarten. She’s so young, she won’t even fucking remember her, which is so crazy to think about. My mom is such a huge part of her life, but if she dies Bridget probably won’t have any vivid memories of all the times they’ve spent together. All she’ll have are pictures, and stories other people tell her. My mom won’t get to see her start school, or graduate, or get married… she’s gonna miss everything.

She might not even get to meet my kids.

Fuck.

I am not going to fucking cry. The only thing that could make this night any worse is me bawling like a little bitch at two am!

Crying doesn’t fucking solve anything. It’s not gonna make my mom less sick, or even make me feel better. It’ll just make me feel weak and pathetic, and it’ll more than likely leave me with a pounding headache. And I hate how fucking splotchy and puffy it makes my face. I’ll look like I got attacked by an entire hive of bees or something. That, coupled with how shitty I’m already gonna look from getting absolutely zero sleep tonight, is something no amount of makeup can hide.

Like I even have time to put on makeup in the mornings when I have five kids to take care of!

In case I didn’t make it clear before: Fuck.
Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fucking *fuck*!

The sound of the bedroom door opening behind me causes me to freeze. Not that I was moving, but somehow I manage to lie even more still than I already was. It’s probably one of the kids, woken by of a nightmare, or because they’re feeling sick. And I should roll over and see which one of them it is, and what they want. But instead I lie here with my eyes squeezed shut, willing them to go back to bed without asking me for anything. I know that makes me an asshole, but I don’t feel capable of being or doing anything for anyone right now.

I’m running on empty.

I can vaguely hear them approaching the bed, and even though the mattress is designed to keep you from feeling anything when whoever you’re sharing it with moves, I can still tell that I’m no longer alone on the bed anymore. Then I feel a hand on my arm, and it’s way too big to be one of the kids. Not even Ezra.

I roll over quickly, trying not to freak the fuck out when I find someone lying beside me. And it only takes me a second to realize who that someone is.

“What the fuck?” I gasp, blinking against the darkness, hoping like hell that I’m not imagining things. “*Taylor*?”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you.”

I push myself up until I’m sitting, wondering if I feel dizzy from doing so too quickly or because I have no idea what the fuck is happening. Am I dreaming or something?!! Without putting much thought into it, I reach out and pinch him. I’m not entirely sure what part of him I pinched, it’s a little hard to see. Whatever it was made him yelp in pain and sit up to face me.

“I said I was sorry!”

“I didn’t mean to hurt you, I just… didn’t think you were actually here.” I explain dazedly. “Why *are* you here?” He doesn’t reply, and even though it’s still hard to see him clearly, I can *feel* him staring at me. And somehow I know exactly what look he’s giving me. “So… what? You just ditched your tour and flew back here?”
“Not exactly.” His hand brushes against my upper arm soothingly, and I feel my body instinctively relax. Until he speaks again. “I played tonight’s show and then got in a rental car and drove here.”

“You drove? From Vegas? That’s like four fucking hours away!”

“So? You once drove four hours to see me when I was on tour. And we barely knew each other at the time.”

“Well, you know me.” I sigh, collapsing back onto the mattress. “There’s not much I won’t do for a good fuck.”

“Whatever.” He snorts softly as he drapes his arm across my abdomen and snuggles up beside me, kissing me on the shoulder.

Only a moment ago, his touch practically made me melt. But now it’s making me totally tense. “Look… it’s not like I’m not happy to see you; I am. But… if you drove all this way ‘cause you think I need a shoulder to cry on or something-”

“I drove all this way because I love you, and because I wanted to be here for you tonight. In whatever way you need me to be.”

Damnit. It’s like he’s trying to make me cry.

Asshole.

“I don’t know what I need.” I finally admit in a mumble. “I just… I wish I could fucking sleep.”

“Maybe you could if you weren’t so tense.”

For once I wasn’t angling for sex, but if it’s being offered, I’ll gladly take it. “Are you saying what I think you’re saying?”
“Probably not.” He smirks faintly, his fingertips tenderly stroking their way down my forearm until his hand finds mine in the darkness. “Come on.”

“Where are we going?” I frown as he begins to tug me off of the bed.

“Come with me and you’ll find out.”

I resist for another moment or two, because I’m really not sure I can be fucking bothered to go anywhere right now. But eventually I allow him to lead me into the unlit adjoining bathroom.

When I reach out to find the light switch, he blocks my hand. “Why can’t I turn on the lights?”

“Because baths are more relaxing in soft light.”

“This isn’t soft light, it’s no light.” I point out. “We can’t take a bath in the dark, you idiot. We’ll probably trip on the bathmat and break our damn necks.”

He releases his hold on my hand and leaves me for only as long as it takes to return to the bedroom and turn on the light in there instead. It’s bright enough to shed a gentle glow into the bathroom, just enough for us to see what we’re doing. I gotta admit, it’s a hell of a lot better than having the light on in here. Anything more than this would have felt harsh and intrusive.

This is perfect.

“We’re not going to take a bath in the dark, you idiot.” He tells me playfully as he makes his way back into the room.

“Who you callin’ idiot, asshole?”

Rather than respond to my taunting, he pulls me closer and kisses me softly on the lips. And just when I think he’s about to pull back again, his mouth returns to mine, but this time at the very corner. Then again on my cheek, leaving a trail of light kisses until he reaches my ear.
“Shut up and get naked.” He whispers, his hushed voice causing me to instinctively bite my lip.

He doesn’t need to tell me twice.

My eyes never leave his body as my fingers find the button on my jeans and unfasten it, just as I was ordered to. I watch him walk over to the tub, leaning over to turn on the water and adjust it to find the right temperature. I study every move he makes, the way his shoulder blades flex beneath the fabric of his t-shirt. My gaze drifts lower, appreciating the way the tight denim of his jeans hugs that fucking perfect ass of his…

Especially when he’s bent over like that.

For a second, it’s as though everything else around me disappears, like I have tunnel vision or something. I can’t hear the sound of the running water anymore, I can’t see the tiled floor at our feet, or the bathtub in front of me. All I can see is him. Next thing I know, I’m stalking across the small space between us and grabbing him from behind. I think I was planning on turning him to face me, but as soon as I feel his body against mine, I don’t want to put even an inch between us again. My hands grasp his hips, curling over the jut of his hip bones, and he groans as my mouth meets the nape of his neck. He reaches back to hold me closer as his body grinds against mine, and that’s enough to make me lose it. Whatever it is.

If I ever even had it to begin with.

I hear him gasp when I start to yank impatiently on his belt, feeling it loosen a little only to tighten again. His hands nudge mine out of the way and take over, so I refocus my attention on unzipping his pants. As soon as I hear the clink of his belt buckle, I push his hands aside and fumble for the button of his jeans, my lips still leaving hungry kisses across his upper back, desperately seeking skin that they can’t possibly get to until one of us removes his shirt. Lucky for me, that’s exactly what he does next. Right before turning around in my arms and swiftly lifting my t-shirt over my head, too.

His mouth on mine is pure relief. I think I may have actually fucking whimpered, or something as equally pathetic, but I couldn’t help it. Why the hell haven’t we been doing this since the moment he crawled into bed with me?! I cling to him as he lowers us onto the cold floor beside the tub. I’m sure that it probably looked more
like we fell, or crumbled into a heap, but to me it felt fluid and effortless. So does the way he tugs down my jeans as I impatiently try to push his down over his thighs with my fucking feet just so I won’t have to stop kissing him. We’re a hopeless, chaotic, writhing mess.

But it feels totally fucking perfect.

That’s what he does. To me, to my life. He calms the commotion, finds order in the disarray, and makes even the ugliest things seem beautiful somehow. It’s like the way I see the world changes when he’s here. He lights up all of the darkness and smooths all the rough edges. He makes it all hurt a little less.

And at the same time, he knows just how to make it hurt in all the right ways when I want him to.

I’m so wrapped up in him, and the things he’s making me feel, that I don’t feel the water on my skin. Or maybe I feel it, but it’s like the last and least important sensation that my body is being exposed to. Of course, Taylor is more responsible than I am, even in moments like this, so he’s the first one to figure out why we’re lying on a wet floor.

“Shit!” He exclaims, struggling to push himself up off of the ground. His first attempt completely fails, leaving him slipping on the tiles beneath us and almost collapsing on top of me again.

I didn’t think I’d find anything to laugh about tonight, but I’m practically rolling around in hysterics while I watch him scrambling to turn the bathtub faucet off. I’m expecting him to start grabbing every towel in the room to sop up the puddles, because like I said, he’s responsible. But instead he collapses at my side, and I hear him laughing right along with me.

Until suddenly I’m not laughing at all anymore.

My eyes aren’t watering from laughing too hard, and my body isn’t shaking with uncontrollable amusement, it’s wracked with sobs. I will it to fucking stop, because this is so not what I want to be doing right now. Or at all. Ever. But it’s like the more I try to hold myself together, the more I fall apart. And once Taylor wraps his arms around me, holding me protectively against his bare chest as my tears dampen his skin, any hope I had of reining this shit in is lost completely.

I can’t make it stop.
I can’t make *any* of it stop.
When I drove here from Vegas after the show, I was pretty sure I knew how the rest of my night (or extremely early morning) was going to play out. I didn’t come home because I thought that Tommy was suddenly going to be ready to open up to me and tell me how he was feeling, I didn’t expect him to want to talk about it at all.

I figured that he’d probably just want to have a lot of sex.

What actually happened was the absolute last thing I thought would happen. Not even the last thing; it wouldn’t have made the list at all. Because I’ve never seen him as wrecked as he was last night. The closest was probably when he came to see me in the hospital right after I first woke up from the car accident. He was so ashamed of himself for leaving me, for giving up on me, even for just a moment. And he cried, yes, but he didn’t sob like he did last night.

For as long as I live, I don’t think I’ll ever be able to forget it. It’s not everyday (or night) you find yourself lying on the bathroom floor, comforting your weeping husband while he finally releases months worth of fear and frustration. We were both completely naked, Tommy in more ways than one. He clung to me like he was afraid to let go, to be alone. It was the closest I’d felt to him in a
long time.

Without saying a word, he finally let me in and let all of his pain out.

But now… I don’t know what to think. Besides mumbling something about being cold, and retreating back to the bedroom, he hasn’t said a word to me since his tears stopped. We crawled into bed together, and fell in and out of sleep for a few hours. I’ve been awake for a while, just watching him stare at the ceiling as the sun starts to rise. I’m right beside him, almost touching him, but it’s like there’s this thick, invisible wall between us. I may as well not even be here, that’s how indifferent to my presence he seems.

Eventually I force myself to make the first move, to reach out across that inches wide void and make contact. He flinches when my fingertips touch the skin of his forearm, like he had forgotten that he wasn’t lying in this bed alone. But once that momentary shock subsides, he doesn’t pull away from me. He lets me lightly run my hand from his wrist to his elbow, and then back again.

“Did you get much sleep?” I ask, more from a need to say something than from genuine curiosity. I’m ninety-nine percent certain that he barely slept at all, and his half hearted shrug pretty much confirms that suspicion. “You should get some rest. I can get the kids ready for school.”

“Don’t you need to leave?” He frowns, and I try to convince myself that it’s just a question, not an instruction disguised as an inquiry.

“Not until later. I have to be at the airport just before noon to drop off the rental car. I have a one o’clock flight, but I don’t have any bags or anything, so I don’t need to get there too early.”

“Right.”

“So… do you want to stay here and try to rest?”

He sighs heavily, closing his eyes. “Sure.”

I don’t know which is more difficult for me: leaving him here alone, or the unshakable feeling I have that he’d prefer it if I wasn’t here at all.
I grudgingly roll off of the bed and trudge into the bathroom to take a shower. But the first thing I see when I walk in the door is the pile of towels beside the bathtub, and I remember that there were no clean, dry towels left in here after last night’s minor flooding. After gathering the damp towels into my arms, I take them down to the laundry room and dump them into the washing machine, then I grab some new ones from the closet and head back upstairs. I glance at Tommy as I walk past the bed, unsurprised to see that he hasn’t moved a muscle. It honestly wouldn’t surprise me if he stays right where he is until I leave for the airport.

Maybe after that, too.

At least the kids are excited to see me. Well, excited and confused. The only excuse I could come up with for my unexpected visit is that Tommy got food poisoning and I came home to help out so that he can get some rest. I hate lying to them, but it seems to satisfy their curiosity, and it also explains Tommy’s absence at breakfast. Ezra, of course, is not fooled. He’ll officially be a teenager this weekend, but he’s been too old for me to fool with my lame excuses for a long time now. Guaranteed, the moment a half-truth passes my lips, he knows there’s something going on. And it’s not fair for me to leave him wondering what that something might be, not when he’s so aware of all of the things it could potentially be.

When he lingers in the school parking lot at drop off after his brothers and sister have headed off to find their friends, I close the backdoor of the minivan to keep Asta from overhearing our conversation. Not that she would care to listen; she has a DVD to watch for the one hundredth time, and that’s far more interesting.

He doesn’t even need to ask me what’s going on, the worried look on his face says it all.

“Tommy got some bad news last night.” I explain quietly. “Dia isn’t doing very well.”

“What does that mean?” He frowns. “Does she need another operation?”

“We don’t know yet. Her doctor’s haven’t figured out what they’re gonna do next. But…”

“Is she… going to die?”

“I don’t know, buddy.” I sigh sadly. “No one knows that right now.”
He takes a moment to process what little information I’ve been able to give him, then he looks me in the eyes. “What can I do?”

“What do you mean?”

“You said you had to leave again later today.” He points out pragmatically. “And Tommy’s not really sick, is he? He’s upset.”

“Yeah, he is.” I admit.

“So what should I do to help?”

“You’re already doing it.” I pull him into a tight hug, in awe of what an incredibly empathetic young man he’s becoming. He was always a compassionate kid, but after we lost his mom I was so afraid that he lost that sensitive side of himself, too. A few years ago, I never could have imagined that this was who he would be now. “You help out a lot, I know you do. It’s not your responsibility to do more than you’re already doing.”

Besides, I’m not sure if Tommy would let him do anything more to help. Even if he needed the help, he’s too damn stubborn to ask for it. Especially from one of our kids.

Once Asta is happily settled in at pre-school, I call Tommy to see if he wants me to pick anything up from the store on my way home. He doesn’t answer his phone, which is both worrying and a relief at the same time. Hopefully it means he’s sleeping, not ignoring my calls. I drive towards the freeway to head home, but I end up driving right by the on ramp for 101, and instead I find myself heading east through Burbank towards Dia’s house. I don’t even know what made me do it, I just know that it wasn’t a lapse in concentration. It was intentional on some level, whether I’m aware of my reasons or not.

Dia seems just as bewildered to see me standing on her doorstep at nine-thirty in the morning as I am to be here. She’s still in her bathrobe, and clearly wasn’t expecting company. But she gladly welcomes me with a hug and insists that I come in, whether she looks “presentable” or not.

“When did you get back?”

“Last night. Or incredibly early this morning, I guess.”
“I didn’t think you were coming home until Saturday this week.”

“I wasn’t. I mean, I’m not. I’m only here for a few more hours, then I have to fly out to Salt Lake for a show tonight.”

“Wait a second.” She stops in the middle of the hallway and turns to face me in surprise. “Are you saying you came all the way back here just for one night?”

“Well… yeah.” I chuckle as I awkwardly rub the back of my neck. “I didn’t want Tommy to be alone.”

After staring at me incredulously for a long moment, she slowly begins to shake her head in amazement. “I’ve said it before, and I’ll say it again: I’m so glad he has you.”

“I… it wasn’t a big deal. Our show last night was in Vegas, it wasn’t that far.”

“It was far enough.” She replies matter-of-factly, leading me through to the kitchen. “I would offer you some coffee, but I haven’t been drinking it lately so I haven’t bought any grounds.”

“Oh, that’s fine. I’ve already had plenty this morning.”

“I have herbal tea?”

“Uh… sure.” I accept gratefully. “But only if you let me make it.”

She rolls her eyes at me, but the smile remains on her lips. “You’re as bad as Tommy. I’m not a cripple.”

“I never said you were.” I contend as I carry the kettle from the stove to the sink and fill it with water. “I’m just a control freak in the kitchen, that’s all.”
“Uh-huh.”

“So how are you feeling?”

When I glance at her on my way back across the kitchen, I notice her smile falter before she has chance to hide it. “I’m not sure, honestly.”

“Are you… in any pain?”

“Hmm… not too much.” She sighs, sinking into one of the chairs at the kitchen table. “I was in some pain yesterday, that was why I went in to see my doctor. But he prescribed me some more pain pills and they seem to be doing the trick. They just make me nauseous. But I was already nauseous anyway, so it’s nothing new.”

“Right…”

“How’s Tommy doing? I’m a little surprised he didn’t come with you.”

“I left him at home to try and get some sleep while I took the kids to school, and I just kinda ended up here. It wasn’t planned. He’ll probably come by later, or at least call to see how you’re doing.”

“I’m less worried about myself than I am about him. Lisa said that when she called him last night, he was talking about liver transplants and second opinions…”

“He didn’t say anything like that to me.” But then again, he didn’t say much at all. “He was upset, but I think… maybe he’s numb right now or something, you know?”

“That does tend to be his pattern.” She acknowledges thoughtfully. “He’ll get upset, but then it’s almost as though he decides that he doesn’t want to feel it anymore, so he just pushes it all away and refuses to let it in”

“Until he can’t keep it out anymore, and then he tries to find other ways to escape it instead.” I agree, retrieving a couple of mugs from a nearby cupboard.
“That’s what concerns me the most. When Ron passed away, Tommy was able to literally run away from the reality of it. He put physical distance between himself and everything that was happening, and it made it easier for him to pretend he was okay. But he’s not the same person he was five years ago, he’s not living the same life. It’s not an option for him to run away this time, he has to stay and feel every last bit of it. And I’m not sure he knows how to do that. At least, not in a healthy way.”

The exact same thing worries me, too. That, and the way she phrased her own concerns. It could have come out wrong, maybe she was unaware of the fact that she basically just said she was going to die from this, like it’s a foregone conclusion. But the feeling I get from the look in her eyes as I set a cup of steaming water in front of her tells me that she knew exactly what she was saying.

“Dia… are you still planning to get any kind of treatment?” I ask gently, watching her pull a small wooden box full of various types of tea bags towards us from the center of the table.

“Of course.” She assures me. “I’m not about to give up now.”

“Good.”

“But…” My hand freezes as it reaches for some green tea. I wasn’t expecting a ‘but’. I don’t want there to be a ‘but’. “I think I’m starting to realize that no matter how hard I fight this, or for how long… in the end, it’s not going to matter.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m not sure if other cancer patients feel this way at some point, I’m not even sure if I’ll feel this way when I wake up tomorrow. But today, right now… some part of me knows that I’m not going to win this.”

“Dia-” I begin to protest, but she places her hand over mine to silence any arguments I might make.

“I meant it when I said that I’m not giving up. I’m not admitting defeat here. But I’m also not blind to the reality of the situation. I saw the look on my doctor’s face last night, Taylor. He hasn’t looked at me that way before.”
“Well… maybe Tommy’s right, maybe it’s time to get a second opinion.”

She nods contemplatively, patting my hand before releasing it and picking out some lemon ginger tea. “If he wants me to, I will.”

She doesn’t say that she doesn’t expect it to make any difference, or for another doctor to have any ideas that her current one hasn’t already had. But somehow that’s what I hear in the silence anyway.

“Are you scared?”

“A little.” She admits with a small, weak smile. “I think I’m more sad than scared right now. I never saw any of this coming…”

None of us did.

And there’s nothing I can say that will make her feel better. All I can do right now is close my fingers around hers and give her hand a gentle supportive squeeze. She smiles at me gratefully, but it’s short lived; she doesn’t have a whole lot to smile about right now.

Within minutes, she changes the topic of conversation to the tour, and how my family in Tulsa is doing. Anything to avoid discussing her health, basically. And I can tell it’s what she needs right now, so I chat away amiably like there’s nothing more important going on in either of our lives than my little sister’s graduation trip to Europe.

By the time I get home, Tommy has ventured out of bed and taken a shower. I find him in the kitchen, finishing off the last of the coffee in the pot I made this morning.

“Isn’t that cold by now?” I ask, wrinkling my nose like I wouldn’t have drunk it myself. We both know I would have (and have, many times). “I can make you a fresh pot.”

“It’s fine. I don’t really care.” He shrugs as he heads out onto the kitchen terrace and takes a seat at the small patio table.

He didn’t say he wanted to be alone, and he didn’t close the door behind him as a very clear sign that
he doesn’t want my company. But I still can’t shake the feeling that me following him out there isn’t what he wants right now. And normally, I would give him his space (and then worry about him non-stop until he eventually tracks me down and tells me what’s on his mind). But I have to leave for the airport soon, and I doubt he’s going to be ready to talk before that.

So I take a deep breath and step out onto the terrace with him, quietly sinking into the seat beside his and allowing the quiet to linger a little longer.

“You were gone a while.” He says finally, surprising me even though I’d been staring at him since the second I sat down.

“I… stopped by to see your mom.” I admit carefully.

His gaze falls from the Hollywood Hills before us to the cold coffee in the mug he’s holding. “You didn’t tell me you were going over there.”

“I didn’t know I was going to. I just kinda decided to after I dropped the kids off. I wouldn’t have felt right leaving town without seeing how she was doing.”

“How is she doing?”

“She’s…” I’m not sure I know the answer to that question. But I’m pretty sure that ‘I don’t know’ isn’t what he needs to hear right now. “She’s putting on a brave face, I think. I mean… she’s not ‘okay’, obviously, but she’s handling it better than most people probably would.”

“Better than I did.”

“That’s not what I said-”

“I never said you did.” He cuts me off, finally turning to face me as he places his mug on the glass tabletop. “But it’s true. I had a total fucking meltdown last night.”

“I think you’re entitled to. This isn’t a small thing, Tommy. It’s a lot to deal with, and no one can fault you for not holding it together all the time.” I insist wholeheartedly, reaching over to take his
hand in mind. He doesn’t pull away, but I definitely feel him flinch beneath my touch again, as though yanking his hand away from mine was his first instinct. So I hold on that much tighter. “You’re allowed to be scared.”

For a while he simply stares at my fingers wrapped around his. He doesn’t move, or speak. It feels like everything is on pause, until eventually his hand shifts out from under mine and he pulls it into his lap and out of my reach. I can’t seem to retract my own hand, though, I’m not even sure I can feel it anymore. It just sits there on the table while I gaze at it in confusion.

“Look, I’m not saying this to upset you or anything, but…” He begins somewhat awkwardly, and when I can finally tear my eyes away from my dead weight of a hand long enough to look up at his face, I can see how conflicted he clearly is. “Can you just... go?”

“Go?” I reply dumbly.

“You being here… it’s like it makes it okay for me to be weak.”

“It is okay for you to be weak sometimes.”

“Maybe, if you’re around to hold stuff together when I can’t. But you’re not here-”

“I am! I’m sitting right here, Tommy.” I protest.

“For like the next twenty minutes, and then you have to go. And that’s fine, I’m not trying to be a jerk about you leaving. I know you have a job to do and I’m okay with it. This isn’t me pushing you away or being pissed off that you’re on tour. I just…” He shakes his head slowly, sadly, his jaw clenching for a moment as he fights to keep up this calm, rational front. “I need to get my shit together so I can take care of the kids, and my mom, and… the longer you sit there and tell me it’s okay to be weak and fall apart, the more I just wanna crawl back into bed and not deal with anything. And I can’t do that. Not again. Not if you’re not here.”

“Oh…”

Okay. I get that. I’m a mature, rational adult… most days. I can handle this. He made it clear that he’s not trying to push me away, and he doesn’t resent me for abandoning him when he needs me the most. He didn’t even use the term ‘abandoning’, that’s all me. Everything he just said make
sense, even if it hurt to hear it. If I argue with him and make a big deal about it, I'll only be making things unnecessarily worse for both of us. All I need to do right now, all I can do, is what he needs me to do.

Even if it’s the last thing I want to do.

I'm aware that I'm moving, but it's as though I can't feel it. I can see my surroundings change as I stand up from my seat and step out from behind the table, but my whole body is just... numb. I pause beside his chair for a moment, silently debating whether or not I should attempt to kiss him goodbye. We're not fighting, but I'm still not sure he wants me to get that close if I'm just going to walk away from him afterwards.

I can’t leave without saying or doing something, though. It doesn’t feel right.

“I love you.” I tell him wholeheartedly as I lean down and place a gentle kiss to the top of his head. I breathe in, savoring his scent, the warmth of him so close. My lips linger for a moment longer, reluctant to leave him. “I'll be home soon.”

I'm not expecting him to respond, but as I pull away to head back into the house, his hand reaches for mine and holds onto it so tightly that it hurts. It brings me to a sudden and complete stop, and when I turn to face him again, I find him looking up at me.

His eyes meet mine and hold my hopeful stare. “I love you, too.”

“I know.”

The entire drive over to LAX, I have to resist the urge to take each and every exit off of the freeway, turn the car around, and go home. I know I can’t. If I miss this flight, I won’t make it to tonight’s show. Part of me doesn’t care at this point. But I know that my brothers and the hundreds of fans who have bought tickets, and possibly travelled long distances to see us play, do care. Besides, there’s a good chance that if I did ditch the show and go home, Tommy would be so pissed at me for doing it that he wouldn’t even talk to me.

Just as I’ve boarded the shuttle over to LAX after dropping off the rental car, my phone rings. I stupidly hope that it’s Tommy, even though I know he’s already said all that he’s capable of saying to me for now. I wasn’t expecting it to be Ike calling, but I guess it makes sense.
“Don’t worry,” I tell him in lieu of a polite ‘hello’. “I’m on my way to the airport as we speak.”

“Oh… well, great.” He replies uncertainly, and I immediately feel like an ass for being so curt with him. It’s not his fault I’m frustrated. “I just wanted to check in and see how things were going.”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to snap at you.”

“It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not. You didn’t do anything wrong, I was just upset.”

He sighs sadly on the other end of the line. “I guess that answers my question.”

“I guess.”

“I take it Tommy’s not doing so well?”

“Not really. I mean… he’s holding it together for the kid’s sake, but…”

“Yeah… I can’t even imagine what he must be feeling right now.” He sympathizes. “Or you.”

“I’m just worried about him. And I feel like shit for leaving him alone.”

“I know, man. I wish I could just tell you to go home and forget about the tour and everything.” I can hear him take a long, deep breath. “I mean, it’s not like it would be impossible…”

“What wouldn’t be?”

The next words out of his mouth are ones I never thought I’d hear from my responsible, business-minded big brother. “Cancelling the rest of the tour.”
“Ike-”

“It’d be messy, and expensive. But at the end of the day, there are more important things in life. And this is one of those things.”

“I appreciate the offer, you have no idea. It means a lot that you’d even suggest it. But honestly, as much as I want to be with Tommy right now… I’m not sure it’s what he wants.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s not like he doesn’t want me around. But I can’t do anything to fix things, or change things. And even though he’s exhausted and everything, I think he’s kind of glad that he has to handle everything alone, you know? Like he needs the distraction. If I’m there, he has less to do and more time to think… it’s like it’s easier for him if I’m not around right now.”

“I’m sure that’s not true.” Ike tries to console me, but even though I can tell he believes what he’s saying, I’m having a tough time convincing myself.

Especially after my last conversation with Tommy.

“It’s okay. I’ll be okay, and we’ll be okay…” I shake my head faintly, gazing out of the shuttle bus window as it pulls up to my terminal. “It is what it is.”

“Sorry, bro.”

“Thanks, Ike.”

We say our goodbyes and I get in line behind the handful of other passengers waiting to grab their luggage and head into the airport. That urge to turn around and go right back home is still nagging at me, but I continue to ignore it as I make my way through the bustling crowds towards security.

All I can do right now is the exact same thing that Tommy’s trying to do: get my shit together and
face my responsibilities, no matter how much I’d rather crawl back into bed with him and not deal with anything.
I know my apologies are basically meaningless at this point, but I REALLY am sorry for the delay between updates. :( Obviously, being pregnant and having a lot of things to get done before the baby arrives means that writing has to be less of a priority for me. But it's never far from my mind, and I DO try to write whenever I can (like at 5am today when I couldn't sleep. lol)

If I thought that the six weeks before my impromptu trip home to comfort Tommy had passed slowly, I don't even know what word I would use to describe the slower than molasses pace of the last seventeen days. Usually the busier things are, the faster time passes. But that wasn't the case this time. Even with the craziness of a tour, and my son officially becoming a teenager, and Dia starting her new treatment plan, the days dragged on and on.

It feels like forever since I last saw Tommy and the kids. And the horrendous freeway traffic that our tour bus is currently stuck in halfway between San Francisco and Los Angeles isn't helping to keep my increasing impatience to get home to them at bay!

But after tonight's show in Hollywood, the tour will officially be over.

Starting tomorrow, I can say good morning to my family in person instead of saying it over the phone, and I can kiss my kids goodnight instead of blowing them kisses through a computer screen.
And I can hold Tommy’s hand when he needs me to, even if he doesn’t seem to know how to admit that he needs me to most of the time. But I guess that’s how he’s learned to cope since I’ve been gone. He won’t admit that he needs his hand held because that’s too much like admitting he can’t single-handedly cope with everything he’s going through. And he’s terrified that if he admits that, it’ll all come tumbling down around him.

After a couple of days of consulting with colleagues and talking it over with Dia, her doctor came to the conclusion that another surgery was too risky. He decided to start her on radiation along side the chemotherapy she was already receiving, in the hopes that one or both would finally start to beat back the spreading cancer cells, or at the very least keep them from spreading further and buy us some time. Tommy was less than pleased with that treatment plan, and Dia agreed to get a second opinion to placate him. But when the second opinion was no different from the first, Tommy was forced to accept that her doctor had been right, and that simply cutting the cancer out wasn’t actually all that simple, and wouldn’t have been the best course of action in her case.

At first he was understandably disappointed (and that’s an understatement). But that disappointment was quickly replaced by anger. And while that anger is just as understandable, I can’t say that I think it’s healthy. I get that it’s just another way for him to protect himself from the fear and pain that all of this is causing him, but he can’t stay angry forever. And the longer he keeps throwing up these defenses, the more it’s going to hurt when they all inevitably have to come down.

I wish I could spare him from having to feel any of it, but I know that’s impossible. The only thing I can do is be there.

That is, if we ever get back to Los Angeles!

“What the hell is going on?” I sigh wearily as I stand in the aisle of the bus to try and see out of the front window. “It’s like one o’clock on a Saturday afternoon! Why is there traffic?”

“Because this is I-5.” Ike points out, glancing up from his laptop to smirk at me. “In California.”

“Is there ever not traffic on this god forsaken freeway?” Asks Zac semi-seriously.

“Maybe at like… midnight?” Ike shrugs.

“Relax, man.” Andrew pats me on the shoulder as he passes me on his way to the bunks. “We just passed Santa Clarita, so we’re only an hour away now. We’ll be there in time to set up and
soundcheck, no problem.”

That’s honestly the least of my concerns right now.

I pull out my phone and slump petulantly onto a nearby seat as I open Google Maps and zoom in on our current locations to see just how much further this traffic goes. For one, brief moment I see a glimmer of hope in the form of a beautiful, green, traffic-free road just a few miles ahead of us… but then my heart sinks when I scroll down towards our destination and see that, as usual, all of the freeways between North Burbank and Hollywood are bright red and littered with those dreaded ‘collision’ symbols.

Damn L.A. traffic! It’s one of the very few things I hate about living in that city.

I try to pass the last hour or so of our journey by napping in my bunk. But I’m way too antsy (and caffeinated) for that, so I spend the entire time squirming around in a hopeless effort to get comfortable. And by the time I actually do start to relax and settle down for some shut eye, the driver announces our arrival at The Fonda Theater. If we were anywhere else, I might be annoyed that I have to get out of my bunk now that I’m finally comfortable. But it’s hard to be annoyed when I’m home.

And it never hurts to look out of the bus window and see several dozen fans lined up beneath a marquee with your band’s name and the words ‘sold out’ on it, either.

I quickly text Tommy to let him know that we’re here, and that he can come by with the kids and hang out whenever they’re ready, and then I hurry to catch up to my brothers as they make their way off of the bus and into the venue. My excitement to be here almost doubles when he texts me back only a few minutes later to inform me that they’ve been ready for hours and are headed out the door. Then I get another text from him telling me that the kids are hungry so he’s going to swing by the In-N-Out on Sunset before coming to the venue, and if I want anything I should text him my order.

Of course, I can’t order In-N-Out for myself without my brothers and our crew going on strike because they didn’t get any, so I end up texting Tommy an order for an obscene number of burgers, fries and drinks.

Hopefully he doesn’t show up here and throw my milkshake at me in retaliation. Though, I wouldn’t blame him if he did.
I’m too busy helping get set up to spend my time pacing by the entrance in anticipation of their arrival like I really want to. My first ‘hint’ that they’re here is the sound of Viggo yelling “Daddy!” at the top of his lungs as he charges across the main floor of the empty theater with his brothers and sisters in close pursuit. All five of them have their arms full off bags of food or cardboard drink carriers, and I’m half expecting at least one of them to fall over and drop their precious cargo all over the floor. But to my surprise (and relief), they all make it to the stage without so much as a stumble between them. Ike, Zac and I quickly relieve them of our late lunch order and then help them climb up onto the stage with us one by one.

By the time we’re done, and I’m in the middle of being tackle hugged, Tommy has joined us and it waiting his turn to greet me.

“Welcome home, rockstar.” He smirks, offering me a hand to help pull me up off of the stage once our kids are done jumping all over me.

“Thanks.” I beam, tugging him closer for a kiss. “It’s good to finally be back for longer than a couple of days.”

“It’s good to finally have you back for longer than a couple of days. This whole thing where you go off on tour and I stay here and pretend to know what the fuck I’m doing was total bullshit. I don’t wanna do it again.”

“Agreed!”

“Can you two maybe not make out right in the middle of the stage?” Gripes Ike, only avoiding a punch on the arm as he passes us because I know he doesn’t really mean it. “We’re prepping for a rock ‘n’ roll show here, not a low budget production of ‘Romeo and Juliet’.”

“Speaking of rock ‘n’ roll, my guitar’s out in the car. Should I go get it?” Tommy asks, leaving me frowning at him like I have no idea what he’s talking about. Because I don’t. “You forgot, didn’t you?”

Apparently. “Um…”

“I shoulda fucking known.” He rolls his eyes at me, but his arm stays snugly wrapped around my waist, so I know he can’t be too pissed off. “I spend hours learning to play a song, at your request, and you can’t even remember asking me to do it.”
“Oh, that! I didn’t forget, exactly. But you haven’t mentioned it in weeks, so I just figured that with everything that’s been going on, you didn’t want to do it anymore.”

“I didn’t wanna do it in the first place.” He corrects me teasingly. “But then you used questionable means to convince me-”

“I don’t recall you questioning my means at the time.” I retort smugly, keeping my voice down so that no one else around us will hear.

“Whatever. I learned the damn song like you asked, so am I playing it tonight or not?”

“Definitely playing it! Our fans will go nuts.”

“Hate to break it to you, but your fans already are nuts.”

I can’t argue with that. “Heads will explode.”

“Sounds messy.”

“Don’t worry.” I smile, snaking my arms around him and pecking him gently on the lips. “As long as you don’t get too close to the edge of the stage, I doubt you’ll get any on you.”

I was already looking forward to tonight, but now I’m even more excited!

There should be several familiar faces in the audience (besides the usual suspects), and even more of our friends are planning to put in an appearance at the after party we’re holding at The Fonda’s rooftop lounge after the show. I haven’t seen Alex or Holden in months, and it’ll only be the second time that Tommy’s mom has had the opportunity to spend time with Shauntae and Sam. Jenna’s supposed to be coming, and I’m pretty sure Tommy said he invited Isaac and Sophie, too.

I haven’t broached the subject with Tommy or Shauntae yet, but I’m kind of thinking that tonight might be the perfect time to tell everyone that we’re having another baby. She just passed the all
important twelve week mark a couple of days ago, and this is probably the only time we’ll have so many people we care about all in the same place. Not sharing our news with anyone has been incredibly difficult. I honestly don’t know how I’ve survived the last eight weeks seeing Ike almost every day and keeping my mouth shut about everything. At this point it feels almost deceptive, and the longer I wait, the guiltier I feel. I’ve even asked Zac to feign shock when I finally tell Ike the truth, because I don’t want him to be offended that Zac knew the whole time and he didn’t.

Lying and sneaking around used to be second nature for me, and I hated myself for it. For the last few years I haven’t had to keep secrets from my family or lie right to their faces, and slipping back into those old habits, even when it’s for the right reasons, feels wrong to me.

Tommy tries to keep the kids occupied until it’s time for soundcheck, and then he joins us on stage for a couple of quick run throughs of what I’m confident will be the most epic encore performance in our almost twenty year career. The rest of the afternoon and evening plays out like almost every other day on tour. Everyone is off working on various things until we need to regroup for a meet and greet with some fans, and once that’s over we all head backstage to relax while our opening band gets the crowd warmed up.

Just before it’s time for us to hit the stage and start our set, the kids and Tommy wish me luck and make their way out to the reserved balcony seating to meet the rest of our family and friends for the show. I never usually get nervous before a performance anymore; I’ve been doing this since I was nine. But the fact that there are so many people I know in the audience tonight, most of whom have never been to one of our shows before, leaves me feeling a little jittery as Ike, Zac and I gather for our traditional band huddle.

Luckily, because everyone I know is up in the balcony, I can look out at the sea of fans on the main floor and pretend that they’re the only ones I’m performing for. Once I’m feeling a little more confident and comfortable, I begin to allow myself momentary glances in the direction of our guests, sometimes catching glimpses of my kids dancing the way they always do at shows, or Alex and Z clapping along enthusiastically. Dia remains seated for the most part, which isn’t surprising, and neither is the fact that Lisa stays by her side almost the entire time. But David is on his feet with Bridget in his arms, and Shauntae and Sam seem to be having a blast hanging out with Tommy.

I’m already riding my usual performance high when we leave the stage after our first “goodnight”. Our fans know better than to go anywhere; they know we’ll be right back for more in a few minutes. And when I see Tommy waiting for me with his guitar just off stage, that high I was on gets one hell of a boost.

“You nervous?” I ask him breathlessly, wiping my face and neck quickly with a towel before grabbing a bottle of water from on top of a nearby amp case.
“Shut up.” He mumbles, warily eyeing the empty stage.

I’ll take that as a yes. “Don’t be. The run through went great, and the real thing will be even better.”

I don’t get a response because he’s too busy fussing with the tuners on his guitar. And possibly trying not to throw up. Ike taps me on the shoulder to remind me that we’ve still got work to do, and I quickly throw back another mouthful of water.

“See you in a minute!” I smile excitedly, leaning in to kiss Tommy on the cheek before jogging back out into the spotlight to join my brothers.

We play a couple of our usual, upbeat encore songs, getting the audience riled up again after giving them just a couple of minutes to catch their breath. The energy exchange between us and them has always amazed me. Even after almost two hours of constant singing and playing on our side, and jumping around and dancing on theirs, we can all always find that little bit more to give just when it starts to feel as though there’s nothing left.

I know the crowd is expecting something special for our last song of the night. We end pretty much every tour by having our opening act join us on stage to perform a classic cover song. But tonight is going to be a little different…

“We wanna thank you guys for being here tonight.” I tell the exhausted yet still elated audience, taking a moment to comb some sweat drenched hair out of my eyes with my fingers. “You’ve been incredible!”

“This is our last song of the night—”

“Of the tour.” Zac interjects as Ike continues his lead-in to our final performance.

“So we decided to do something a little special for you guys.” He finishes with a knowing smile, and I give the audience a moment to scream their lungs out in approval before I begin to play the opening notes.

The screaming gradually dies down as more and more people focus their attention on the music, trying to figure out what song it is we’re about to play for them. It takes a little longer than usual for most of them to catch on, because it’s not a song we perform very often; I could probably count on
one hand the number of times we’ve played it since it was recorded for one of our fanclub EPs a few years ago. But once they start to catch on, and people start turning to their friends and excitedly gasping the song title at each other, the screaming starts all over again.

“Come on now,” I whisper huskily into the microphone, my eyes rising from the keyboard to meet Tommy’s as he fidgets nervously at the side of the stage. “Don’t be shy.” He glares at me playfully, as though I’m calling him out personally. I’m not, though! This is just how the song starts. It’s not my fault it’s so fitting in this moment. “Standing over there… why don’t you come on over?”

The moment he steps out into view, plucking his guitar strings in time with Ike, the audience goes absolutely insane. And I can’t help but grin so widely and so proudly that it almost keeps me from singing.

“I want to touch you, wanna touch you right now…”

I’m not sure anyone in the crowd can actually hear us playing over all of the screaming at this point, but they seem to be enjoying the performance regardless. And they somehow manage to get even louder when I eventually pull my microphone out of the holder, leaving De to take over on keys so that I can turn my attention to Tommy instead. His nerves have noticeably dissipated by the time we start the second verse. He’s tuned out the audience and is lost in the music, and whenever he gets this way it’s always a total turn on for me.

I’ve never had the opportunity to share a stage with him this way before, I’ve only ever been able to watch from a distance, to look but not touch. I know we basically got engaged during a concert in New York a few years ago, we kissed in front of a thousand people, and it was one of the biggest rushes I’ve ever experienced. Definitely a moment I’ll never forget, for so many reasons. But this, playing music with him in front of so many people, putting on a show for thousands of pairs of eyes and ears while simultaneously being so wrapped up in the music and each other that they may as well not even be present… it’s a different kind of rush.

A different kind of unforgettable.

It’s something I’ve wanted to do for years, something I’ve fantasized about doing countless times. And even though I can’t quite live out my fantasy in full, because our children are present (not to mention the fact that we’d probably get arrested for public indecency and my brothers would never talk to me again), I can still have a hell of a lot of fun with it. I can stand behind him, trailing my fingertips teasingly across the top of his shoulder, up the side of his neck, and into his hair as his body practically melts against mine. And I can get so close to him that I’m sure everyone in the audience is convinced I’m about to drop my mic and make out with him.
Believe me, it takes every last ounce of willpower I have *not* to!

When we reach the breakdown, Ike very graciously hands the guitar solo off to Tommy. For a moment, I’m as entranced by him as the audience is. I forget that even though I’m not currently singing or playing an instrument, I’m still supposed to be participating in this performance in some way. When Tommy notices that I’m basically just staring at him, a smug smile curls the corner of his mouth. He takes a step towards me, and then another, and I finally snap out of my lust fuelled daze and allow instinct to take over. I do the first thing I can think of to do, the *only* thing.

He watches attentively, biting his lip as I sink to my knees on the stage at his feet. This isn’t something we rehearsed (in fact, we didn’t rehearse any of the things I’ve done since I ditched my keyboard after the first chorus). But it takes him only a second to respond as though this had all be plotted out down to the last detail. He practically thrusts his guitar towards my face, but it’s really his hips that are thrusting at me, tempting me, the guitar just happens to be in the way. Which is probably for the best. My hand creeps its way up from his calf to his thigh, stopping just short of grabbing his ass. Suddenly my mind is assaulted by a barrage of flashbacks, of every time I’ve ever dropped to my knees in front of him, and I find myself unintentionally moaning. The microphone isn’t as close to my mouth as it would be if I were singing, so hopefully the people in the front row are the only ones who really heard it.

Not that it’d be the first time I’ve moaned in the middle of a live performance…

What can I say? Music moves me.

As I slowly get to my feet once again, I make sure to keep my body as close to Tommy’s as I can every inch of the way without inhibiting his playing. In an effort to make my job even easier, he turns his back to me, giving me the opportunity to press myself flush against him. One hand remains possessively at his hip as I raise the microphone to my lips with the other and try to control myself enough to finish the song rather than simply making the pornographic noises he’s inspiring me to make while he writhes against me.

Being aroused while standing in front of thousands of women is not ideal. But again, it’s also not the first time it’s happened to me. I find that if I just pretend to be oblivious to it… well, they’ll usually take pictures of it and then point it out to everyone on various social media platforms later. But in the moment, it just doesn’t matter. Yes, I’m a male, I have the anatomy that goes along with that, and I’m happy to report that it’s *fully* functional.

We’re all adults here, so let’s just move on!
Tommy remains on stage with us for the bow with our backing band, and then follows Andrew and De off stage to give the three of us a moment to thank the audience one last time and take our final bow together. But as soon as I’m off stage, he grabs me by the arm before I can even grab a much needed bottle of water. I stumble my way over cables and guitar cases as I allow him to drag me further backstage and into a dressing room. Only then does he remove his guitar, revealing that I’m not the only one who was turned on by the little show we put on out there. He was just lucky enough to have a way to hide it from everyone else present.

“That was fucking hot.” He tells me breathlessly before crushing his lips to mine.

His kisses are so demanding that even if I wanted to respond to his comment, I couldn’t. He takes a fistful of my shirt in his hand, pulling me even closer as he leads me across the small room towards a couch that we tumble clumsily onto. The second the weight of my body settles over his, he’s hungrily grasping at my hips while his own thrust helplessly against them. I’m sure he could get off just by doing what he’s currently doing, but we both know there’s a faster and much more satisfying method. When I finally manage to tear my mouth from his and begin kissing my way down his t-shirt covered chest, he groans appreciatively and all but shoves my head lower in obvious desperation.

“I swear, when your hand was on my leg, I almost fucking lost it right there on stage.” He gasps, his hips instinctively rising off of the couch just enough to allow me to yank his jeans and underwear down.

“I know the feeling.” I smile up at him, our eyes locking for a second, long enough for me to be sure he’s watching my every move as my mouth descends on his erection.

“Fuck …”

Oh, how I wish we could.

Sadly, we don’t have time for that. We probably don’t even have time for this, which is why it’s a good thing that he’s so turned on and so damn close already! This might just be the fastest I’ve ever gotten him off before. If it weren’t so satisfying to hear him moaning my name as his body begins to jerk and shudder uncontrollably beneath my touch, I’d be disappointed that it was over so quickly.

But there’s no possible way I could ever be disappointed when the taste of him is still lingering on my tongue, and the heat of his body is still so impossibly close to mine.

When I’m home.
I wish I could lie here on the ratty dressing room couch with Tommy a little longer, at least until he’s capable of breathing somewhat normally again. But unfortunately for both of us, Tommy has to take the kids home to meet the sitter so that he can come back and enjoy the rest of the evening. And I have to somehow calm myself down, cool off, and change out of my sweaty concert clothes so that I can go up to the rooftop bar and greet our guests.

Because I had the genius idea of hosting a party immediately after the show.

I really hate myself sometimes.

Sure enough, the two of us have barely had time to stand up and straighten our clothes before we hear Bex on the other side of the door calling my name. We share one last kiss, much too brief for my liking, and then we reluctantly make our way out of the room. The kids are already waiting in the hall for us with Jenna, who very kindly brought them backstage in Tommy’s absence. I’m not sure if that’s something he arranged with her beforehand, or an old habit from when she used to accompany us on tour, but I’m grateful either way. Not that Lisa or Dia would have let them wander off into the crowd or anything, they would have been perfectly safe staying up in the balcony until Tommy went to meet them. But this way they can all “sneak” out through the backstage exit and avoid running into the majority of our fans.

There are still some hopeful souls waiting out by the bus, there always are, and I’m not surprised that more than a few of them want Tommy’s autograph or a picture with him, especially after that encore. Bex ushers the kids over to our family’s minivan while Tommy politely tries to excuse himself so
that he can join them. I would have thought that, after all the exposure he’s had to our fans, he’d know better than to think that merely telling them that he needs to leave will assuage their demands for a selfie. It doesn’t help that he can never seem to say no to fans, regardless of whether they’re his or mine.

“You can go.” I assure him with a nudge of my hip against his. “You don’t have to do this.”

“I know, but I don’t wanna be an ass about-”

“Tommy, can you sign my ticket?”

“Uh, sure…”

He reaches out to take the piece of paper that’s being waved in his face, but I quickly step in front of him and take the ticket myself.

“Guys, he really can’t stay.” I tell them apologetically while he quickly takes the opportunity to make his getaway. “He has to get the kids home.”

Shit… probably shouldn’t have said that.

Five buck says some crazy just ran to get her car and follow him back to our house.

Hopefully the fact that Ike and Zac have just come out of the venue is enough of a distraction to keep our gathered admirers from noticing or caring which direction Tommy drives off in as he pulls out onto Hollywood Boulevard.

“Where did you get to after the show?” Zac asks me teasingly as he accepts the first piece of merch he’s asked to sign.

I cast a chastising glare at him, noting how it only seems to amuse him even more. “I had something I needed to do.”
“I bet.” Ike snorts. “That was some... interesting improvising you did on stage tonight, bro.”

“Is that what the kids are calling it these days?” Snickers Zac.

“Whatever. The crowd loved it.”

“How would you know? You seemed oblivious to the fact that you had an audience after the first verse.” My big brother accuses lightly.

He’s not entirely wrong.

I came incredibly close to losing sight of where we were and who was watching. It was almost as if Tommy was the only thing I was aware of for those three minutes we shared a stage together. Almost. Obviously I was aware enough of the audience to keep myself from doing any of the pornographic things I would have done if no one else had been present.

I doubt Ike wants to hear that, though. So instead of continuing to defend my performance, I focus my attention on the fans and sign as many CD’s and t-shirts as I can in the ten minutes I’ve allotted myself to spend out here before I need to get on the bus and clean up for the party.

By the time I’ve extricated myself from the post-show fan mob, washed up, and changed my clothes, Tommy has already dropped the kids off at home, gotten them settled with a sitter, and made it back down to the venue. It helps that we only live five minutes away, but it’s still nice to be able to walk into the party hand in hand with him and greet our family and friends together.

The rooftop bar area is a decent size, but there are more people present than I expected, so it feels like it’s bustling with activity. There are a couple of Tommy’s old friends here, most of whom I’ve only met a handful of times because he hasn’t really spent much time with them over the last couple of years. I know he’s been trying to change that lately, though, and I’m glad he decided to use this party as an opportunity to have them come and hang out for a while.

I’m not so glad that he apparently invited Adam.

I know I should just get over it; Tommy’s not holding a grudge, so it’s pointless for me to. But after how hard he took losing his job, and seemingly their friendship along with it, it’s a challenge for me to look at Adam and not think of the months of self-doubt and loss I watched Tommy struggle
through this year.

I’m distracted from my silent resentment when someone wraps me in a hug so tight, and so abrupt, that it almost knocks me off of my feet. It forces me to let go of Tommy’s hand, not only so I can properly return the embrace, but also to avoid pulling him down with me if I do lose my footing.

I’m not at all surprised to discover that the person in my arms is Alex. “Long time, no see, gorgeous.”

“Hello to you, too.” I chuckle buoyantly, giving him one last squeeze before we simultaneously release each other and take a step back. “How was the tour?”

“Fucking awesome. Yours?”

“Same, for the most part.” I smile, gladly accepting the bottle of Corona that Z holds out to me before greeting her with a one armed hug. “I can’t believe we haven’t seen you guys in months!”

“I know!” She agrees regretfully. “But we’re all done with summer and fall tours now, so hopefully we’ll get to see a lot more of you guys.”

“You’re welcome to come over anytime, you know that.” Tommy smiles as the two of them share a brief embrace. “Your dumbass boyfriend, on the other hand…”

“Yeah, yeah.” Alex rolls his eyes and gestures for Tommy to come closer. “Why don’t we just skip the foreplay for once, huh?”

I can see Tommy fighting back a smirk as he steps into Alex’s open arms. “When did I stop being worth the effort, bitch?”

“Aw, don’t be like that, beautiful. I just figured you probably got all the foreplay you could handle when you were on stage tonight. And probably immediately afterwards as well.”

“Oh, right… that.” I find myself blushing faintly when Z begins fanning herself dramatically with her hand. “Yeah… that was… fun.”
“I’ll bet it was!” Winks Alex. “I was so proud, wasn’t I babe?”

“There were actual tears in his eyes.” She confirms with a giggle. “I think it may have been one of the best moments of his life.”

“Oh, top ten, at least.”

“Your life makes me sad.” Tommy teases him, snatching the can of Pabst out of Alex’s hand and taking a long sip.

“Hey, how about a little sympathy? Not all of us are lucky enough to have Taylor Hanson humping our leg in public.”

I open my mouth to emphatically inform him that there was no humping, but I’m interrupted by Dia tapping me on the arm. Because of course Tommy’s mom had to be standing right behind me while my best friend accuses me of humping her son’s leg in front of thousands of people.

Where else would she be?

“Sorry to interrupt.” She apologizes sincerely.

“You’re not interrupting.” I assure her with a gentle hug. “It’s good to see you!”

Maybe it’s the low light of the rooftop playing tricks on me, but I swear she looks even more tired now than she did when I saw her a couple of weeks ago, which I didn’t realize that was possible. And it’s also impossible not to notice how small she feels in my arms. I know it’s probably ridiculous to be afraid of hurting her by hugging her too tightly, but I suddenly find myself worrying about it anyway.

“And you, honey. I just wanted to properly welcome you home. I wish I could stay and enjoy the party a little longer, but…”

“No, I totally understand. It’s already pretty late.”
“Past this one’s bedtime.” David smiles, nodding his head to Bridget, who is currently slumped in his arms and fighting to keep her eyes open. “But thanks for inviting us out tonight, it was great!”

“Yeah, we had a blast!” Lisa smiles brightly. “You and your brothers always put on such a great show.”

“Whatever. You don’t even like his music.” Tommy taunts her, sounding just like the bratty little brother he’s intentionally trying to be right now.

“I have never said that!” She exclaims in horror. “For your information, I have several Hanson songs on my iPod.”

“Oh yeah? Name one.” He challenges. “And don’t say ‘MMMBop’, that’s cheating.”

“Okay, children.” Dia chides them, placing a hand on Lisa’s arm to silence her as she prepares to rattle off a list of Hanson songs she apparently owns. “Don’t make me send you to your rooms.”

“You’re not the boss of me.” Tommy mumbles petulantly, earning himself a smack on the chest from Dia. “Ow! Child abuse!”

“You got the child part right.” She smirks before leaning in to give him a kiss on the cheek. “Have fun tonight, sweetheart. You deserve it.”

“Thanks, I’ll try. Go get some rest.”

“Don’t worry, I fully intend to.”

The faint smile remains on his face until his family is out of sight, and then it immediately fades. I can only imagine how exhausting it is for him to keep up the pretense of being okay, when really he’s so frustrated and afraid. But he doesn’t want Dia to see him being those things, even though she knows that he is. Trying to convince him that he’s allowed to be anything other than ‘fine’ in front of her is like trying to convince Asta to eat asparagus. I know it’s good for her, even she knows it’s good for her, but she still acts like doing it will cause her endless suffering.
“Guess we should make the rounds...” He sighs tiredly, gazing around at the various groups of guests mingling under the strings of lights hanging above us. “This is why I hate being the ‘host’ or whatever. You have to say hi to everyone, and make sure everyone’s having a good time, which means *you* don’t get to have a good time.”

“Technically, I’m the host. If you wanna stick me with checking off all of the boxes on the party etiquette list, I won’t hold it against you.”

“I can’t do that.”

It’s obvious from the look in his eyes that he would *love* to do that. “I’m telling you that you can.”

“But-”

“Go, talk to your friends.”

“Have I mentioned that I love you?” He asks, slipping his arms around my waist as he leans into me. “Because I seriously love you.”

“I seriously love you, too.” I chuckle softly, lowering my lips to meet his. “Before you go, I wanted to run an idea by you.”

“Oh yeah? Does it involve us going back downstairs to that dressing room and-”

“Unfortunately, no.” I smile as he pouts at me pitifully, “If Shauntae’s on board, how would you feel about telling everyone about the babies tonight?”

His gaze automatically drifts across the rooftop, most likely in search of Shauntae. “Tonight?”

“Yeah. I mean, she just passed twelve weeks, and everything’s been looking good. I feel like tonight would be the perfect opportunity to share the news.”
“I guess…”

“But if you don’t want to-”

“It’s not that I don’t want to.” He insists. “I just… I don’t know.”

He does know, we both do.

He’s scared. He probably will be until both of our babies are born healthy, with twenty fingers and twenty toes between them. And it’s not like the day Shauntae hit twelve weeks I suddenly felt one hundred percent secure that everything was going to be fine from here on out. But I did breathe a small sigh of relief, because at least that was one major milestone we’d reached. And even if nothing is guaranteed (because when is it ever?), I do feel more certain that things will be okay now. I’m not oblivious to the potential risks and dangers that litter the path between us and that distant due date; I was aware of them all for the gestation of each and every one of my children. But I’ve never lived in constant fear of them until they were behind me.

And I don’t want him to, either.

“Think about it, okay?” I suggest hopefully, pecking him on the tip of his nose and causing him to scrunch his face up in the most adorable way possible. “I’ll ask Shauntae if she minds, and then if you decide you’re ready, we’ll do it.”

After taking a deep, calming breath, he gives a slow nod of agreement. “Okay, I’ll think about it.”

Within seconds of him leaving my side to go and greet his friends, I’m joined by my brothers as they and our backing band arrive on the rooftop. I would be a little worried about Andrew and De being bored because they barely know anyone here, but since JJAMZ spent the summer on the road with us a few years ago, they at least have Alex and Z to chat with if they tire of each other’s company (or ours, which is much more likely). And neither of them is at all anti-social or shy, so I wouldn’t be surprised if they’ve made a few new acquaintances by the end of the night.

“I wasn’t expecting this many people to be here.” Notes Ike as he scans the rooftop for familiar faces. “I don’t think I even know half of them.”

“More than half.” Zac chimes in. “Who said you could have friends we don’t know about?”
“Some of them aren’t even my friends. Actually… aside from you guys, I’d say at least fifty percent of the people here are solely Tommy’s friends. Not that I don’t know them or like them, but I hardly ever see most of them.”

“He ashamed of you?” My little brother teases with a playful poke to the ribs. “Doesn’t want you embarrassing him in front of his posse? I get that.”

“First of all, I don’t think Tommy would ever use the term ‘posse.’” I retort with a jab of my own. “And as a side note, neither should you. Second of all, no, he’s not ashamed of me, we’re just not one of those couples who share all their friendships, like we’re incapable of having anything separate from one another. And third of all-”

“Ooh, he has a third of all.” Ike declares in mock fear, and so I direct my final point at both of them.

“Shut up.”

“Aw, no, come on. I wanna hear your third of all! I bet it’s good.”

“That was my third of all: shut up.” I smirk as I take a sip of my beer and turn to walk away from them. “And enjoy the party!”

I make my way over to where Ryan and Holden are sitting, and Holden smiles as I approach. There’s something different about him, though. At least, I think there is… it’s kind of hard to tell just from looking at him. But as I take a seat beside him, I can’t shake the feeling that something isn’t right.

“Hey, stranger!” He greets me, his smile growing a little wider before he leans in to wrap me in a one armed hug, being sure to avoid spilling his drink on me (or having me spill it on him) by keeping his other hand at a safe distance. “Welcome home.”

“Thanks! It’s good to be back.”

“I feel like we haven’t seen you in forever.”
“Forever isn’t far from the truth.” I smile apologetically. “Everything’s been so crazy the last few months.”

“Yeah…” His smile seems to fade slightly as he nods in acknowledgement.

I glance at Ryan, who is still gazing at his surroundings indifferently, cradling a tumbler of what I’m guessing is whiskey in his hands. “Hey, Ryan.”

He glances at me briefly, forcing a small smile. “Hey.”

“I thought you guys were giving up drinking while your surrogate is pregnant? Solidarity, and all that.”

It suddenly dawns on me that maybe their surrogate isn’t pregnant anymore. Maybe that’s why they both look less than genuinely happy. I figured Holden would let me know if something like that had happened to them, but it’s not impossible that he didn’t want to ‘bother’ me while I was out on tour.

Shit… I hope I’m wrong.

Please let me be wrong!

“We were going to quit.” Holden tells me when Ryan returns to his half-hearted people watching without a word. “But apparently we just didn’t have the willpower.”

“How’s everything been going with the whole surrogacy thing, by the way?” I question cautiously. “She’s gotta be about… four months along now, right?”

“About that.” He nods. “Not quite halfway there, but getting close.”

“That’s crazy! I swear it feels like you were just telling me and Tommy that she was pregnant. But I guess a lot’s happened since then.”
“Yeah…” His smile seems to falter for a second, but it’s back so quickly that if I’d blinked I would’ve missed it. “So how was the tour?”

I can’t help but frown at his abrupt change of subject, but I don’t want to badger him about why he seems to want to switch the focus to my life rather than his. Hopefully, whatever it is that’s going on with him, he’ll confide in me about it when we’re not surrounded by people he barely knows.

“It was a lot of fun. It’s hard being away from Tommy and the kids, we’re definitely not going to try that one again, but other than that it was great getting out on the road for a while.”

“Don’t Tommy and the kids usually tag along?” Asks Ryan.

“They have on the last couple of tours, but the timing just didn’t work out for this one.”

He nods thoughtfully for a moment, and just as Holden opens his mouth to continue the conversation, Ryan appears to think of something more to add. “It’s nice, you know? That he wants to go with you when you have to leave town for work.”

“Yeah, he’s always been really supportive. And he knows I’d do the same for him if he asked me to.”

“Right. Because that’s what you do when you love someone.”

Why do I get the feeling this line of questioning isn’t as innocent as he’s making it sound. “Uh… yeah, I guess. When you can.”

“How’s Tommy been doing? I saw his mom earlier…” Holden asks, making yet another topic jump that leaves me even more convinced that something isn’t quite right.

“He’s doing okay, considering. Some days are worse than others. His bad days generally correspond with hers, and lately she’s been having more and more bad days, so…”

He shakes his head sadly, staring down into his drink. “I feel so bad for them, cancer is the worst.”
“No arguments here. It’s been a rough few months, that’s for sure. And I doubt it’s gonna get any easier anytime soon. But we’re dealing, for the most part.”

“Well, if there’s anything you need, you know where to find me.”

“Thanks, Holden.” I offer him a sincere smile as I give his arm a grateful squeeze. “I appreciate it.”

“I need another drink.” Ryan announces (as much as anyone can announce anything in a mumble), standing from his seat and walking off in the direction of the bar without so much as pausing to ask if Holden wants a refill.

But maybe he noticed that Holden’s glass was still half fu-

I don’t even have time to finish my thought before Holden has thrown the rest of his drink back in one go, draining every last drop from the glass before getting to his feet. “I’m gonna get another, too.”

“Oh… okay.”

“You want another beer while I’m up?”

“Oh… no, thanks, I’m good.” I assure him as I get up from my seat. “But I should probably go say hi to a few other people. A hostess’s job is never done.”

My attempt at coaxing a smile out of him isn’t entirely successful, but I swear I saw the corner of his mouth twitch in amusement, so it wasn’t a total failure. “Yeah, of course.”

“I’ll come and find you later, okay?”

“Sure. I’ll be here… somewhere.”
After watching him walk away, and resisting the urge to go after him and interrogate him about the weird tension I felt between him and Ryan, I force myself to turn around and find the next group of people I need to greet. I’m pleasantly surprised to see that Tommy has left his friends and found his way over to the small table that Shauntae and Sam are occupying. I figured he’d spend most of the night with the people he sees least often, especially since he spent time with other people before and during the show tonight.

“Got room for one more?” I ask as I approach their cozy looking huddle.

Tommy pretends to consider his options for a moment before rolling his eyes and making a show of grudgingly scooting over on the small, leather ottoman he’s sitting on so that I can perch on the edge. And then he wordlessly takes my beer as retribution.

Fair enough.

“You guys having a good time?” I ask them hopefully. “I know you don’t really know many people here…”

“We’re having a blast!” Sam tells me sincerely. “This is probably the first ‘adults only’ outing we’ve had all year.”

Tommy almost spits out his mouthful of beer in horror. “Seriously?”

“We go on dates a couple of times a month, but this is different.” Shrugs Shauntae. “We don’t get invited to many parties. Not unless they’re kids birthday parties or family stuff.” She leans in as though she’s confiding a scandalous secret to us. “There are actual famous people here.”

“No one told me Adam Lambert was coming.” Sam adds.

“Me either.” I smirk as I turn to Tommy and shoot him an accusatory look, which he of course chooses to ignore.

“I feel so underdressed.” Shauntae sighs, looking down at the flowy floral top and jeans she’s sporting. “I couldn’t even button my pants. I had to use a hair tie to keep them up!”
“I don’t even know how that would work.” Frowns Tommy, prompting Shauntae to cast a cautious glance around the rooftop to make sure that we’re not being watched too closely before she lifts her shirt just enough to show him the hair tie looped through the buttonhole of her jeans and hooked over the button. “Huh… I know what I’ll be doing next time I eat too much Taco Bell.”

“You look awesome, regardless of how your pants are being held up.” I assure her.

“You have to say that; I’m carrying your babies.”

At the mention of our unborn offspring, I discreetly nudge Tommy with my elbow to get his attention. He doesn’t respond at first, but eventually he takes a slow, deep breath and looks at me before nodding permissively.

“On the subject of you and the babies…”

“Yeah…?” Shauntae chuckles softly, and if I’m not mistaken, a little nervously.

“We were wondering if you’d be okay with us making an announcement tonight… maybe?” I ask, biting my lip in anticipation.

I was expecting her to hesitate, especially since there are “actual famous people here”. But she doesn’t seem to give the request a second thought before shrugging unconcernedly. “Of course.”

“Really?” Tommy asks in surprise. “We don’t want you to feel like pressured or anything.”

“I don’t. I definitely wish I’d worn something fancier if I’m gonna have all eyes on me, but I totally understand why you guys want to do it tonight. It makes sense, what with your friends being here, and me being twelve weeks along now…”

“Exactly!” I smile gratefully.

“So when do you want to do it?”
“Well… I guess there’s no time like the present.”

“Okay.” She laughs softly, taking a breath to settle her nerves. “Lead the way!”

Taking Tommy by the hand, I make my way across the rooftop towards the bar with Sam and Shauntae following close behind. I ask the bartender to turn off the music for a minute, and he obliges without question. The sudden end to the background music is enough to make most of the people gathered pause their conversations to look around and see if they can locate the cause. And when I climb up onto the bar, everyone turns to pay attention. I try to tug Tommy up with me, but he resists.

“You’re gonna break your fucking neck.” He tells me bluntly. “Why do you always have to climb on shit?”

“Don’t be a wuss.” I tease him, and he glares at me for a moment before heaving a sigh of defeat and carefully hoisting himself up onto the bar to join me.

“Hey, everyone.” I give a small wave of greeting as our gathered friends and family make their way closer so that they can hear what I’m saying. “First off, I just wanna say thanks for coming out. Whether you were at the show or just came by for the party, it’s awesome to see you all, and we hope you’re having a good night.”

“Take your shirt off!”

I don’t even have to wonder who yelled that comment at me, and as soon as I spot Alex in the crowd and see the smug look on his face, I know my first and only suspicion was correct.

“Go fuck yourself!” Tommy shoots back at him over the ripples of laughter from our friends.

“Anyway,” I cut them both off pointedly before their back and forth can continue. “Since you’re all here, we have some pretty big news we’d like to share.” I glance at Tommy to see if he’d like to do the honors, but he shakes his head almost immediately. I should have known he’d rather let me handle the public speaking. “A few of you have already met Sam and Shauntae tonight,” I gesture down to where they’re standing beside the bar, and they bashfully wave so that there’s no doubt that they’re the people I’m referring to. “We met them earlier this summer, and they’re both really incredible women. For many reasons, including the fact that they’ve agreed to put their family, and their lives… and in Shauntae’s case, her body, through a hell of a lot in order to help us have another
I give everyone a minute or two to react, whether it’s gasps of surprise, murmured questions to the person next to them about whether this is a joke, or in a couple of cases, cheers and applause.

“And we’re totally and completely thrilled to be able to tell you that, as of just a few days ago, she’s twelve weeks pregnant.” I announce to another round of cheering and shouts of congratulations, this time from twice as many people as before. “With twins!”

I think Ike’s jaw just hit the floor. I’m not sure I’ve ever seen him look quite so stunned, and considering the number of times in my life that I’ve given him cause to be shocked or outraged by my behavior, that’s saying something!

“So please raise a glass, or bottle, or whatever it is you have in your hand to the very selfless and amazing Shauntae, and her wonderful wife Sam, and to the next crazy turn our already crazy lives will be taking in about six months from now!”

As dazed as everyone is by such unexpected news, they all toast as Tommy and I hop down off of the bar to hug Sam and Shauntae and try to prepare ourselves for the inevitable onslaught of congratulations and questions that we’re about to face.

There’s no doubt in my mind that at least half of the people here think we’re absolutely insane for wanting to have more children than we already do. Most of them thought we were insane to have five in the first place. Not that Tommy had a whole lot of say in how many kids we already had, but he certainly took his share of crap for choosing to take on such a huge responsibility in one fell swoop. But there’s also no doubt in my mind that, to some degree, every last person here is happy for us.

There’s no reason for them not to be; this is in no way bad news. It’s something to celebrate and look forward to. And right now Tommy needs all the reasons he can find to embrace the future rather than fear it.
I know it's been 6 weeks since I last updated, and I feel horrible about it. :( I honestly think about this fic on a daily basis and feel guilty for not writing more often. But I've been so busy getting ready for when the baby comes (10 weeks to go until our due date!), I never have the time or energy to left to sit and write. And obviously, in 10ish weeks, my time and energy will be even more limited. I have no way of predicting when I'll be able to devote myself to updating this story on a regular basis.

To be clear, I am NOT saying that this story will never be finished. I have a lot of ideas, and I want to finish this fic. But... life. So I'm just putting this out there as a notice to anyone still reading that 6 weeks might not be the longest you have to wait between chapters over the next year or so. I don't even expect that most people will care about this story in 365 days anyway. But I promise that I will continue to try to write whenever I can and update as often as possible. I just want to make it clear that I don't foresee "as often as possible" being all that often for a while. :( Again, I'm SO sorry. I had NO way of knowing that my life would take this amazing turn when I began writing this story.

The second Tommy and I set foot back on solid rooftop after our little announcement on the bar, our friends and family descend on us with questions and congratulations. It’s not unexpected, and we (mostly) take it all in stride. Although, after only a few minutes we find ourselves engaged in separate conversations with different groups of people. And only a few minutes after that, we’re forced to release the supportive grip we’d had on each others hands as we’re literally pulled deeper and deeper into those conversations. The whole thing is much subtler than us being torn apart and swallowed whole by two raging rivers, but somehow that’s what it feels like as his fingers slip through mine and I lose sight of him.
“I just can’t believe we spent the last two freaking months together and this never came up.” Ike exclaims in disbelief. “I mean, you never even hinted.”

“I had no clue!” Zac concurs a little too dramatically for my liking. If he’s not careful, his little performance is going to get us both in trouble.

Alex shakes his head sadly, putting on his own emmy worthy act. “I may never get over the betrayal. If I can’t trust my best friend to be honest with me, how am I ever supposed to trust anyone else ever again?”

“I’m sorry, guys. I wanted to tell you, I really did. But we agreed we were going to keep it to ourselves until Shauntae was out of the first trimester.”

“I get it.” Ike assures me. “I just don’t think I could’ve kept my mouth shut that long, not around you guys. I don’t think any of us have ever been able to keep that stuff secret before, at least not from family.”

“Well, mom and dad and Dia have all known for a while. But Tommy only told his mom because she’s sick and he wanted her to have something to look forward to.”

“Understandably.” Notes Alex with obvious sympathy.

“And then I felt bad that Dia knew and mom and dad didn’t, so I told mom while we were rehearsing for the tour.”

“Wow… this is all so crazy.” Chuckles Z in astonishment. “I always thought you were insane for having five kids. Six would’ve blown my mind, but seven ?!”

“Yeah, that was an…. unexpected and completely unplanned turn of events. But I think we’ll just about be able to handle it.”

“Our parents did.” Ike shrugs like it’s not such a big deal. “You just rope the older kids into diaper changing and babysitting.”
“That’s what I told Tommy!”

“But make sure you up their allowance to compensate. I’m still kinda pissed about mine staying the same.”

“I bet being a multi-millionaire by the time you hit puberty helped ease the pain.” Z nudges him playfully.

“The only one of us who hadn’t hit puberty when we hit it big was this one.” He thumbs at Zac. “Me and Tay toiled away without compensation through the rigors of broken voices, braces and pimples...”

“To be fair, Tay never really had braces, and he had like one pimple between the ages of thirteen and thirty.” Zac corrects him matter-of-factly. “And Ike, your voice was always pretty deep, so no one really noticed when it broke. You both got off easy. My voice started breaking right before our first major tour! I was in the spotlight for all of it; the pimples, the chubby phase...”

“Both of which you probably could’ve skipped if you hadn’t gone on the Fat Burger diet.” I tease him lightly.

“Says the guy who never gained an ounce of fat no matter how much junk food he ingested for the entire duration of his teen years.” Alex interjects, poking me playfully in the stomach.

“And most of his twenties.” Grumbles Ike in feigned (I hope) resentment.

“Let’s hope these kids inherit those genes.” Smiles Z.

“Actually, anything they get from me will have to come through nurture, not nature.”

Ike frowns for a moment as he works through what I’ve just said in an effort to make sure he’s interpreting it correctly. “So... they’re not yours?”

Every time this subject comes up, I kind of just want to lie to people. Or not even lie, just nod and smile and not correct them. Not because I’m not happy that Tommy will be the biological father. It’s
what I wanted, I had to talk him into it several times! But because it gets kind of old hearing the same responses and getting the same confused looks. People automatically assume that the babies will mine, because our other kids are. But that’s one of the main reasons I wanted Tommy to be the father this time.

Besides, it would be kind of fun to see if anyone can actually tell that I’m not the biological father as these two little ones grow up. It’s not uncommon for people to assume that Tommy is the father of our other five kids, especially Asta and Viggo. Sometimes even I can see a resemblance between them, as insane and impossible as that might be. I swear they’ve picked up so many of his mannerisms and facial expressions over the last few years, it makes it hard to look at them and not see a little of him in there from time to time.

“They’re mine, just not biologically.”

“Tommy reproduced?” Alex’s eyes practically light up. “I can’t wait to see how that turns out.”

“Meaning what, exactly?” I ask in mock offense, taking a sip of my beer as he tries to make his next statement sound a little less offensive.

“I didn’t mean it in a bad way. Just that…”

“Yeah?”

“I hope they get his lips and eyelashes.”

Nice save, Alex. “Me, too.”

“A toast, to Tommy’s lips and lashes!” Z announces cheerfully, raising her glass in the air.

“Do we have to toast to that? It’s weird.” Cringes Ike, but the look she shoots him seems to persuade him to get over it pretty quickly. “Fine. To Tommy’s… face, I guess.”

“Tommy’s face!” The rest of us chorus in amusement as our beer bottles and glasses clink.
“Why the hell are you creepy motherfuckers toasting to my face?” Frowns Tommy disapprovingly, appearing at my side and surprising me so much that I almost choke on the sip of Corona I just took.

“Why the fuck wouldn’t we?” Alex counters, reaching out and trying to touch the tip of Tommy’s nose.

He’s lucky he doesn’t lose a finger. “Come near me with that thing, and you’ll be fisting yourself for the rest of your life.”

“Are you trying to turn me on?” He smirks, waggling his eyebrows at my husband and receiving nothing but a stony glare in response.

“I need another drink.” Ike excuses himself before either of them can take this to a place that would make him even more uncomfortable than he already is.

“Right behind you.” Zac agrees as he downs the rest of his soda and follows our big brother over to the bar.

“What’re you doing over here?” I ask Tommy, curling my arm loosely around him and pulling him closer. “I thought your friends would be interrogating you for a lot longer than that.”

“Me too. But I guess babies aren’t all that interesting to them or something.” He shrugs apathetically. “Once they got done congratulating me and telling me how batshit crazy they think I am, they were kinda done. Besides, I heard someone over here say something about my face, and I wanted to know what the fuck was going on.”

“We were just appreciating the pretty.” Z informs him unashamedly. “Not that Taylor isn’t an incredibly pretty guy, and not that he doesn’t produce incredibly cute kid-.”

“But we can’t wait to see what your kids look like.” Alex concludes for her. “They’re definitely getting some good genes.”

“Whatever.”
“One of these days you’re gonna learn to graciously accept a compliment.”

“Sure. Maybe the same day you stop blatantly drooling over married men.” Tommy counters, his hold on me tightening just enough for me to feel it but probably not enough that he even realizes he did it.

I love it when he gets possessive, even when we both know he has no need to. “To be fair to Alex, there’s very rarely any actual drooling involved.”

“Right? I do have manners.”

Tommy rolls his eyes, but I can see him fighting back a hint of a smirk. “Yeah, sure. You’re the politest pervert I’ve ever met.”

“Thank you! I’ll be here all night.” Grins Alex as he takes a bow.

“In that case, I need a refill.” Z chuckles, taking him by the hand and winking at us over her shoulder as she leads him across the rooftop towards her next cocktail.

“So…” Tommy looks around us at all of our guests and heaves a tired sigh. “How much longer do you think we have to stay?”

“You’re such a little shit sometimes.”

“All the time.”

“You know you’re having fun, you just don’t like admitting it.” I taunt him, turning him to face me and locking both arms securely around his waist. “You’re too busy pretending to be a grumpy old man.”

“Who’s pretending?” He mumbles petulantly.
“You’ve spent the last two months cooped up at home, running around after the kids, dealing with a lot of really crappy stuff basically by yourself. You deserve to relax and have a few drinks with your friends.”

“Maybe it’s what I deserve, but that doesn’t mean it’s what I want.”

I quirk a skeptical eyebrow at him. “So what would you rather be doing, grandpa?”

“*You*.”

I guess I should have seen that one coming. “You can do that anytime.”

“Anytime except *now*, right?”

“Put the pout away and go mingle.” I order him, pecking him on the lips before smacking him on the ass.

I watch him as he drags his feet all the way over to where Adam, Terrance, Isaac and Sophie are enjoying another round of drinks, and he makes sure to cast several pathetic looks at me over his shoulder. Just in case I wasn’t aware of how much he thinks I’m torturing him by forcing him to socialize instead of sneaking off to have sex.

It’s for his own good!

For the next couple of hours, every time I glance in his direction I catch him glancing in mine. Sometimes I only glimpse the tail end of a longing look, and others he looks my way just as I’m turning my attention back to the person I was engaged in conversation with. I honestly wasn’t expecting it to be this difficult to relax and enjoy my own damn party! I’d been looking forward to tonight for weeks, I thought it would be the perfect way to end the tour. And as nice as it’s been to see everyone again after weeks and months of conflicting schedules, I’d be lying if I’m not relieved when the party starts to wind down just before one o’clock in the morning. Shauntae and Sam are first to leave, which isn’t surprising since Shauntae is still suffering from lingering first trimester exhaustion. Then Ike and Zac bail and head over to their hotel to get some well earned sleep before their flight back to Tulsa tomorrow morning. Then it’s just a steady trickle of people saying their goodbyes and sharing brief hugs as they make their way over to the elevators.
Until eventually it's just me and Tommy.

At least, that’s what I initially assumed. But just as I’m thanking the bartender with one last tip, I notice that there’s still someone up here on the roof with us. At first I think it must be one of the venue staff, but when they step (or stagger, to be more accurate) out of the shadows they were standing in, I realize it’s actually Holden.

“Hey! I thought you and Ryan left a while ago.” I frown as he reaches out and uses the bar to steady himself. “Are you okay?”

He throws back the last of his drink before placing his glass down clumsily on the bartop. “Great.”

“You don’t look great.” Tommy notes warily. “Where the fuck is Ryan, anyway? Is he getting the car or something?”

“We took an Uber. Couldn’t agree on a designated driver.” He snorts bitterly, slumping onto the barstool beside him. “One of many things we couldn’t agree on.”

“Did he leave without you?” I ask in surprise as I quickly survey the empty rooftop around us for some sign of his spouse.

“It’s fine.” Sighs Holden with a dismissive wave of his hand. “It’s whatever.”

It’s clearly not fine. I’ve seen Holden drunk before, but not in the depressing, sloppy way he is right now. Even when he and Ryan came over to our place to drink their sorrows away after their first failed IVF attempt, he wasn’t like this. And I can tell from the look on Tommy’s face that he’s as concerned and confused as I am by the state our friend is in. Which is why I doubt I’m going to get myself into too much trouble with him by suggesting what I’m about to suggest.

“Maybe you should crash at our place tonight?”

“Nah.”

“No, seriously.” Agrees Tommy, stepping forward to take Holden by the arm and keep him from
falling on his face when he tries to get off of his stool. “Whatever the hell is going on between you and Ryan, you stumbling home shitfaced at one in the morning isn’t gonna make it any better. Trust me, I’m speaking from a lot of personal experience.”

“I don’t wanna impose…”

“You’re not.” I assure him as I help Tommy guide him towards the elevator.

“Yeah, we were just gonna go home and sleep anyway.”

“I love you guys.”

Tommy smirks at me, but there’s a definite sadness in his eyes. Whether that’s because we’re no closer to being alone now than we were an hour ago, or because one of our closest friends is clearly miserable, I can’t tell.

Maybe it’s both.

I half expected Holden to pass out in the Uber before we’ve made it the two miles back to our house, but he manages to stay conscious the entire time. Tommy escorts him through to the family room and gets him settled on the couch while I pay the babysitter, and by the time I join them it looks like Holden is almost half asleep.

“Can we get you anything?” I ask quietly, grabbing a blanket from the back of one of the chairs and draping it over his legs. “Water? Coffee?”

“A bucket?” Tommy adds semi-seriously, bringing a melancholy smile to Holden’s face.

“No thanks.” He sighs as he rolls onto his back and shields his eyes from the dim lamp light. “You guys have done enough already. Just… pretend I’m not here.”

“Holden…”
Maybe now isn’t the time to try to get him talking; he’s drunk and we’re all beyond tired. But tomorrow morning there will be five kids crawling all over the house, listening in when they’re not supposed to, making it impossible for us to sit down and have an honest, uninterrupted conversation.

“I think my marriage is over.” He admits glumly, without any further prompting or prying from either of us.

I think the shock is written all over my face when I turn to look at Tommy, and it’s pretty clear from his expression that it was the last thing he was expecting to hear, too.

“What… I mean… why?” I question as I perch on the edge of the coffee table in front of him and Tommy sinks slowly into a nearby chair. “What happened?”

He shrugs but doesn’t reply, and after a while I start to think that he’s just going to leave us hanging. But eventually, he takes a long, deep breath and answers. “He got a new job.”

“Okay…” Tommy frowns, struggling to understand how something like that could result in their marriage being over. “Why is that a bad thing?”

“It’s not, for him.”

“I don’t understand…” I admit hesitantly as I reach out to place a comforting hand on his shoulder.

He turns his head slowly towards me, finally opening his heavy eyelids enough to meet my concerned stare. “The job is in New York.”

“Oh.”

“You could just go with him, though…. right?” Tommy points out.

“I don’t wanna move to New York.” Holden clarifies, his voice weak and trembling with impending tears. “It’s alright for like a vacation or whatever, but I don’t wanna fucking live there. I don’t want to raise a kid there.”
“I get that. New York is worse than L.A.. I mean, L.A. might be full of human trash, but at least it
doesn’t smell like piss and garbage. For the most part…”

“Well Ryan doesn’t get it. He loves New York. And it’s like… as soon as he got this job, he just
forgot about all the plans we had here. He doesn’t care that our families are here, and all of our
friends… and it’s the worst time for us to move across the country and start a whole new life. I mean,
we’re having a baby! But it’s like he doesn’t even care about that anymore.”

“I’m sure that’s not true.” I tell him as confidently as I can. “He wanted to have kids, you both did.”

“I don’t know what he wants anymore. Except for this stupid job. You know, he didn’t even ask me
before he applied for it. He knew that if he got it they’d want him to relocate, but the thought of
running that by me apparently never occurred to him. I feel like me and the baby are just an
afterthought. We’re… inconvenient. We’re holding him back.”

“Has he said that?” Asks Tommy in disbelief.

“Not in those words.” Holden mumbles dejectedly. “But he doesn’t care that we have no support
system in New York. He keeps saying that people do this kind of thing all the time, and it’s no big
deal. But it’s a big deal to me. I want to stay here.”

Tommy and I exchange helpless glances, neither of us having any idea what to say or suggest that
might somehow help Holden feel better about any of this. “I just… can’t believe something like this
could come between you two. You’ve been together for so long… you love each other, I know you
do.”

“I don’t know…” He sighs, closing his eyes once again as a tear slowly rolls from the corner of his
eye. “Maybe he doesn’t love me, not like he used to. Or maybe I don’t love him. Maybe… maybe
we’re just not who we were when we fell in love, you know? We were a lot younger then, we’ve
both changed…”

“That doesn’t mean you don’t still love each other.” Tommy insists, though he doesn’t sound entirely
sure of himself. “People can change and grow together.”

“Or they grow apart.” Holden counters. “I feel like, if he loved me, he’d care what I wanted. Staying
here with me and the baby would be more important to him than any job. And he thinks the same
about me, that if I love him I should just up and move across the country for him.”

“I’m sure there has to be some kind of compromise… some way to work this out.” I just can’t seem to think of one at the moment. “I know it feels like you’re at an impasse right now, but that doesn’t mean you guys aren’t going to figure it out eventually.”

“Maybe.”

“Are you sure we can’t get you anything else?”

He nods his head faintly as he turns it to face me, and as soon as his eyes meet mine, I see some kind of realization dawn on him. And it’s quickly followed by something that looks a lot like shame.

“Shit… I’m so sorry. This was your big night, and I’ve totally ruined it-”

“Bullshit.” Tommy cuts him off quickly. “You didn’t ruin anything.”

“Right. I’m sure sitting around listening to me complain about my personal problems totally tops any after party plans you had.”

“We were just gonna fuck.” He shrugs half-heartedly. “We can do that tomorrow.”

I feel bad for being on the verge of laughing, like being amused about anything right now is inappropriate. But when I hear Holden chuckling softly as he runs a hand through his hair and makes himself comfortable on the couch, I allow myself to exhale the soft breath of laughter I’d been holding back.

“Well, on that note, we’re gonna head to bed.”


“Anytime.” Tommy tells him with a sympathetic pat on the leg before getting out of his seat and following me out of the room.
The two of us make our way upstairs in silence. Partly to avoid waking the kids, and partly because neither of us knows what the hell to say right now. It’s not everyday that you get blindsided by something like this. Of all the couples we know, Holden and Ryan were one of the most stable. At least, that’s how it looked from the outside. But I guess it just goes to show that you never really know for sure what’s going on in other people’s lives, especially if they don’t want you to know.

God knows I spent most of my life convincing everyone else that I felt things I didn’t, and that everything was great when really I wished so many things could be different.

“Do you need to use the bathroom?” I ask Tommy quietly, closing the bedroom door behind us.

He shakes his head faintly as he takes a seat on the edge of the bed. “All yours.”

Without another word, I slip into the adjoining bathroom and try to avoid looking at my reflection in the mirror above the sink while I brush my teeth. Because if I look at myself, I’m going to start thinking. And the longer I look myself in the eyes, the more convoluted and crazy my thoughts will become. It’s safer if I just stare at the drop of water that’s hanging onto the end of the faucet for dear life.

When I step out of the bathroom, Tommy is still sitting right where he was before. He’s gazing down at his hands, a soft frown furrowing his brow. I don’t even bother asking him what he’s thinking about, because it would be a wildly stupid question. Instead, I silently take a seat beside him and stare thoughtfully down at my own hands until he finally decides to speak.

“This is so fucked up.”

“Aaagreed.”

“I just… I don’t get it. Like… how could Ryan do something like this? They’re supposed to be having a kid, and he goes and applies for a job on the other side of the country without even fucking mentioning it to Holden first?”

“I don’t know.” I sigh as I struggle to come up with any explanation that might make sense of this situation. “Maybe he felt like it was something he needed to do. That’s the only thing I can think of to explain it.”
“He needs some stupid job more than Holden and their kid?” Tommy questions incredulously, and all I can do offer him a helpless shrug in response. “I don’t understand what the fuck he’s thinking.”

“I don’t understand how he could ever leave them over a job, but… maybe it’s something more than that.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean… maybe it represents something more for him, something he feels like he’s lacking or been looking for. It’s not the same thing at all, but... I know what it’s like to be willing to give up everything you have, even your kids... no matter how crazy and selfish and awful everyone else in your life thinks you are for doing it.” I look up to find him studying me intently, probably wondering where the hell I’m going with this line of thought. “I love my kids, I would die for any of them, no question. But I was still willing to walk away from them to be with you. It was a choice a lot of people would have judged me or making. Hell, I judged myself for years for ever even considering it. And no matter how many times I thought about leaving, I never actually it, because I never had a good enough reason to. Until I met you. Until I knew there was actually something out there that I needed as much as I needed them. Maybe even more.”

“So… you think Ryan met someone else?”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“But you think he feels trapped? Like he’s been unhappy for a while, but he never felt like he had a good enough reason to leave? He was waiting for something better to come along?”

“I don’t know, Tommy. I have no idea what he’s feeling or thinking, I’m just saying… maybe he sees this as a chance to start over or something. The job isn’t the reason he’s leaving, it’s just his way of getting to whatever it is he actually wants.”

“Then he should man the fuck up and say that. You did. You didn’t make up some pathetic excuse to leave, you flat out told Natalie why you were going. It was something you’d been dreading saying out loud for years, but you still did it. Because even though it sucked for her to hear it, she still deserved the fucking truth.”

“I know.” I agree, taking his hand in mine and caressing the backs of his fingers with my thumb in
an effort to erase some of the frustration that’s clearly building up inside of him. “Like I said, it’s not
the same thing. And maybe none of what I just said is even close to what’s really going on with him.
I guess I’m just trying to understand it, that’s all.”

He shakes his head sadly, his eyes following my thumb for a moment as it slowly travels across the
bumps and grooves of his knuckles, over and over. “Holden doesn’t deserve this.”

“No, he doesn’t.”

“He was happy. He was in love, and he was having a kid, and he was fucking happy. And now it’s
all gone to shit. And for what? Why? It doesn’t make any fucking sense, it’s like the universe just
decided to screw everything up for him for no fucking reason!”

“I know. It doesn’t seem fair-”

“Because it’s not fucking fair.” He mutters bitterly, pulling his hand from my gentle grasp and
pushing himself off of the bed. “But hey, that’s life, right?”

I don’t have chance to formulate any kind of response to that resentful remark before he disappears
into the bathroom, shutting the door with as much force as he can without actually slamming it (when
you live with kids, you learn how to be pissed off without doing it so loudly that you wake them up).
It doesn’t matter how loudly or forcefully he shuts the door, though, it gets the point across.

He’s been mad for a while now. At everything. At life, at the world, the entire universe… I’m not
saying he doesn’t have a right to be; he has every right. I just hate seeing him so angry. And I feel
like I’m watching that anger slowly turn into something else, something worse. It scares me that I
have no way of making it stop. Anytime I try, anytime I think that maybe I’ve succeeded in breaking
through and chasing that darkness away, something else shitty happens. And then all of that
pessimism and pain comes back even stronger than before.

It’s getting harder and harder to reach him.

Sometimes I’m not even sure that he wants me to. Because it hurts. Everytime I pull him out of that
pit of despair and convince him that things might just be okay, and then they’re not, he falls right
back down again, even further than before. And the further he falls, the harder he lands. The more he
breaks.
But what else am I supposed to do?
When I wake up the next morning, it’s to an empty space in the bed beside me. I reach out one heavy, semi-coordinated hand towards the rumpled sheets, feeling them beneath my fingertips and sighing in resignation over the fact that, no, I’m not still asleep and this isn’t a dream. I really am alone. This was definitely not what I had been looking forward to waking up to on my first morning home. But I guess I can’t really complain. If Tommy isn’t in bed with me, it’s most likely because he’s downstairs taking care of the kids so that I can sleep in.

I allow my body to relax again at that thought, smiling contentedly to myself as I enjoy waking up in my own bed for the first time in a week. Even if it is lacking one insanely gorgeous guitarist. But that sense of calm is quickly shattered as my sleepy mind drifts back to thoughts of last night’s show and party, and how the evening (or very early morning) ended.
I wonder if Holden is still passed out on the couch? Maybe that’s why Tommy got up early, to make Holden some coffee and keep the kids from waking him up with their usual Saturday morning shenanigans. With a yawn, I force myself to roll over and glance at my alarm clock, almost sitting bolt upright in bed when I see that it’s almost eleven am.

I don’t even remember the last time I slept so late!

Usually my internal alarm clock wakes me up if my regular alarm clock doesn’t. I half roll, half fall out of bed and stumble my way into the bathroom to take a shower in hopes that it’ll wash away the thick fog that seems to have settled in my mind. I swear I’m not hungover; I didn’t drink enough to be hungover. I’d better not be coming down with something. Although, after spending six weeks in a confined space with a bunch of other people, shaking hands and taking selfies with dozens of strangers on a daily basis, flying back and forth to L.A. every chance I got, and all in the middle of flu season…

It would be a miracle if I don’t have some kind of bug. It has probably been lurking beneath the surface, just waiting for me to slow down for two seconds and give it the chance to take me down.

Thankfully the shower helps me feel a little more alive and alert, and after throwing on the first clean shirt and pair of jeans I can lay my hands on, I head downstairs to see if Holden is still here and if the kids have driven Tommy crazy yet. But neither of them are anywhere to be found. The blanket I placed over Holden last night is folded up neatly and sitting on the arm of the couch that River and Ezra are currently sitting on, engrossed in their video game. Penny is curled up in a chair on the other side of the room, lost in a graphic novel, and Viggo is trying to teach Asta how to play Uno. He’s not the first to attempt it, and I doubt he’ll have any more success than those brave souls who have come before him. Inevitably she’ll get frustrated that she can’t remember the rules, and that she’s not winning, and she’ll insist on making up her own rules (and changing them mid-game as it suits her), and he’ll get annoyed and abandon her. Then she’ll start sorting the cards by color, and arranging them in neat rows by number before proudly presenting her work to anyone who will look.

And it’s not that her efforts are unimpressive, but I’m pretty sure it’s not what the creator of Uno had in mind.

“Where’s Tommy?” I ask, hoping that someone in the room will take two seconds out of their chosen activity to give me an answer.

“He went out.” Penny tells me without looking up from her copy of ‘Awkward’.
I guess that’s an answer. Just not a very informative one. “Where?”

“He took Duke.” River elaborates distractedly. “But not his car.”

“Oh...”

That means he probably went for a hike or a run. Either way, if he opted to leave all of the kids here, under the supervision of their thirteen year old brother and unconscious father, he obviously wanted to be alone.

“How long has he been gone?”

“About an hour.” Ezra informs me, actually taking the time to throw a glance my way (but probably only because he just drove his race car off of a cliff). “He said he wouldn’t be too long.”

Not more than ten seconds later, I hear the front door open and the unmistakable sound of Duke’s over-energetic paws on the foyer floor. It doesn’t matter how long, or how far you walk that dog, how many hills you make him climb, he’ll still come home with as much, if not more, energy than he left with. As soon as Tommy lets him off of his leash, he comes careening through the house towards the family room, skidding all over the hardwood floors, narrowly avoiding knocking over several chairs at the dining table before lunging at me. I can’t help laughing as I watch him wag his entire body, not just his tail.

We knew the moment we laid eyes on this nutjob at the shelter that he would fit right in with our crazy family. And even though he’s a handful sometimes, and has unintentionally destroyed more innocent, inanimate objects than I can count with his overabundance of energy and enthusiasm, I can’t imagine us loving a calmer, less excitable dog as much as we love him.

“Sorry, I should’ve let him off his leash in the backyard.” Tommy apologizes as he makes his way into the room at a much slower pace than Duke. Judging by the light, highly distracting sheen of sweat on his skin, they were out running, not hiking. “Duke, get down!”

“It’s fine.” I assure him in amusement, watching Duke attempting to obey Tommy’s command despite how excited he still is. His butt is hovering off of the ground, and still wagging frantically from side to side. It looks like he’s trying to sweep the floor with his tail. “He’s just hyper because he hasn’t seen me all week. If he doesn’t get it out of his system now, he’ll have to do it later.”
“I guess.”

“How was your run?”

With a shrug, he turns and heads towards the kitchen, and I do my best to follow him without tripping over the dog the whole way. “Fine.”

“Did you see Holden this morning?”

“He was gone when I got up. He left a note saying thanks and sorry.” He tells me, grabbing a piece of paper off of the kitchen counter and holding it out to me. “I texted him ‘cause he forgot his jacket, but he hasn’t replied.”

“Maybe he had to work?” I suggest as I scan the incredibly brief note. “Or maybe he and Ryan are talking things out?”

“I dunno.” He replies skeptically, pouring himself a glass of water. “After everything he told us last night, it sounds like they’ve already done the talking thing.”

“Yeah, but they’re not done talking. They can’t be if they haven’t figured things out.”

“Maybe they have, though. I mean, it fucking sucks, but if they want different things, and neither of them is gonna compromise… what’s the point in talking about it over and over again? They’re just gonna keep having the same fight and getting nowhere.” I know he’s right, but that doesn’t mean I have to like it. “Shit happens. And shitty things happen, usually to people who don’t deserve it.”

“Maybe I could talk to Ryan-”

“No.”

“But-”

“It’s none of our fucking business.” He reminds me firmly. “Stay out of it.” But I don’t want to stay
out of it. “Taylor -”

“Okay, I’ll stay out of it!”

He rolls his eyes, clearly skeptical that I’ll be able to stop myself from getting involved somehow. Because he knows me, and he knows I suffer from an incurable need to fix everything and everyone. Even if they’re unfixable, and all I end up doing is making things worse. I have to try.

I don’t know how not to, it’s just not in my DNA.

“I need to take a shower.”

“You should’ve cut your run short by ten minutes, you could’ve shared mine.” I smirk, reaching out and tugging on the front of his sweat dampened t-shirt in an attempt to pull him closer.

He smiles faintly, but doesn’t budge. “Just my luck.”

“Maybe I missed a spot…”

“You look pretty clean to me.”

“Wanna do something about that?” I offer, getting him to take a couple of steps towards me, until he’s finally within kissing distance.

For a moment he seems to resist kissing me back, even though I can feel his body sway instinctively nearer to mine. But just as I feel him beginning to respond, and his hands start to trail down my chest, we’re rudely interrupted by River.

Because of course our kids were only going to remain oblivious to our presence right up until the moment I actually needed them to be.

“Dad?”
“Yeah, buddy?” I sigh in defeat, letting go of Tommy and instantly regretting it as I watch him leave the room.

“How about you?”

“I’m supposed to go over to his house this afternoon, remember?” He explains slowly, as if this was information I had in my brain before two seconds ago.

I’m ninety-nine percent certain I didn’t. “When was this decided?”

“The other day.”

“When did you tell me about it?”

“I told Tommy.”

“Right.” Same thing in our kid’s minds. “Uh… what time did his mom say you could come over?”

“Like… in the afternoon.”

“Well it’s not afternoon yet.”

He glances at the clock on the kitchen wall. “It will be in half an hour.”

Can’t argue with that. In half an hour it will be exactly one minute after noon. “Okay, well, in half an hour I’ll take you to Elijah’s.”
“Don’t forget!”

How could I? It’s the reason I won’t be having hot shower sex! But he doesn’t need to know that, so I keep my mouth shut and obediently salute him as he turns and heads back to the family room. I have a couple of options open to me right now; I can either spend the next thirty minutes rinsing off the breakfast dishes in the sink and loading the dishwasher like a responsible adult, or I can go upstairs and perv over my wet, naked husband...

Decisions, decisions.

The dishes will still be in the sink when I get home from dropping River off at his friend’s house, but Tommy’s not gonna be in the shower all day. I don’t actually have to make a choice here; I can be a perv now and a responsible adult later. It’s all about prioritizing!

I’m half expecting one of the kids to intercept me on my way to the stairs, but I somehow make it all the way up to our bedroom without any obstructions or distractions. When I open the door, I can hear the sound of the shower running and an undeniable wave of excitement rushes through me. But when I reach out and turn the door handle to let myself into the bathroom, I find the door locked. And that wave of excitement instantly turns to disappointment. And confusion.

He never locks the bathroom door, not unless we’re in there together and we want to avoid having the kids walk in on us. But when he’s going to be in there alone, and he knows I’m here to deal with the kids, he doesn’t bother. So… I can’t help wondering if he locked it to keep me out. There’s a first time for everything, I guess.

I just hope it’s the first and only time, because I’m really not loving the feeling of him physically shutting me out. I’m not even sure if it’s worse than him shutting me out emotionally, which is sadly a feeling I’ve become way too familiar with these last few months. But even when he was keeping me at arm’s length emotionally, he never pushed me away physically. In fact, it was completely the opposite, he was all over me all the time. And I know I worried about him using sex and physical intimacy to distract me, or himself, or to avoid having conversations he didn’t want to have… but at least he still wanted me there with him. He needed me there, I could feel that much.

Now I can’t really define what it is I feel. It’s like one minute he’s clinging to me for dear life, like I’m the answer to every problem he has. And the next he won’t let me come close… like I’m one of those problems somehow.
I know he’s probably just as confused by it as I am. What he’s going through right now isn’t something he’s ever really been through before, and he’s handling it as best as he knows how, taking it day by day.

I’m just going to have to do the same.

Since I’ve been denied access to the bathroom, I grudgingly return to the kitchen to give that whole responsible adult thing a whirl before I have to take River over to his friend’s house. Tommy still hasn’t come back downstairs by noon, so I tell Ezra that he’s in charge and to let Tommy know where I’ve gone. Assuming he puts in an appearance before I get back, that is.

As I’m on my way to the front door, I spot Holden’s forgotten jacket draped over the back of one of the dining chairs, and I don’t even stop to second guess the immediate decision I make to return it. For all I know this is his only jacket, or his favorite jacket! I don’t want him to be without it. It is November, after all. And even though I personally think that November in L.A. is pretty much the same as summer anywhere else, people who have lived here their whole lives tend to react to the very slight chill in the air like it’s a freaking ice storm.

I’m not using the jacket as an excuse to meddle, I swear, I’m just being a good friend!

After dropping River off in Bel Air, I head over to Holden and Ryan’s condo in Koreatown. I’d never spent any time in Koreatown before I met Holden, but we’ve since spent so much time together that it’s become one of the neighborhoods I’m most familiar with in Los Angeles. It doesn’t hurt that there are some truly incredible restaurants practically on his doorstep. It’s strange to think that all of that could change soon. If Ryan persuades Holden to leave California, this won’t be their doorstep anymore. Tommy and I won’t be meeting up with them for dinner at restaurants with names I can barely pronounce, and we won’t be hanging out at their condo until the early hours of the morning.

I guess that would have been the case anyway, once we all had newborns in our lives to keep us busy and kill off our social lives for a few years. But still… we’ve gotten so close these last few years, I’d be lying if I said that having them move across the country was no big deal to me.

When I call up to their condo, Ryan’s the one who answers. I can tell that he wasn’t expecting me at all, and that the fact that I’m here makes him more than a little wary. But he buzzes me into the building anyway and greets me at the door of their condo with a somewhat welcoming smile.

“Sorry, I shouldn’t have dropped by unannounced.” I apologize as he lets me in. “I won’t stay long or anything, I just wanted to bring this over.”
For a moment he seems confused by the sight of Holden’s jacket in my outstretched hand, but then a look of realization flashes across his face and he nods as he takes it from me. “So he stayed at your place last night?”

“He didn’t tell you?”

“Haven’t seen him since the party.”

“He never came home?” I frown in concern.

“He had an early shift at the hospital. He texted me first thing this morning to say he was fine, and that he spent the night with a friend. I should’ve guessed who the friend was.”

“Yeah, well… he was kinda trashed. We didn’t want to leave him to wander around Hollywood alone in the middle of the night.” I explain, trying to keep a lightness to my tone.

Unfortunately, it doesn’t have the desired effect. “Like I did, you mean?”

“No! No, that’s totally not what I meant.” Shit, maybe I should have listened to Tommy and stayed the hell out of it. “Honestly, the thought never crossed my mind.”

“Relax, Tay. I was only half serious.” He smiles sadly, leading me over to the kitchen. “I’m gonna assume he told you how shitty things have been between us? Not that you needed anyone to tell you; it’s pretty fucking obvious.”

“He… sort of said something about a job in New York, and how you guys were having trouble figuring out what you wanted.”

“Oh, we know what we want. We just don’t happen to want the same thing.” He mutters as he pours us both a glass of water and leans against the countertop behind him. “You probably think I’m a selfish asshole, huh? Asking him to up and move to another state like that, out of nowhere, when we have a baby on the way.”
“I think this job is obviously important to you.” I begin carefully, watching each word I say in an effort to avoid putting my foot in it. Because I’m good at that. It’s almost as though I go out of my way and contort myself to do it. “And I know that Holden and the baby are important to you, too.”

“Of course they are! It’s not like I want this job more than I want them.”

“Have you told Holden that?”

“Repeatedly, but he doesn’t believe me because I won’t just ‘drop it.’” He shakes his head miserably, staring down into the clear liquid in the glass he’s holding. “I’ve been waiting for an opportunity like this for so long. And if I turn it down… there’s probably not going to be another one. I wish I could be okay with that, and shrug it off like it’s no big deal. But that’s bullshit.”

“I know.”

“I’m just afraid that if I don’t take this job because he doesn’t want to move, I’m gonna end up resenting him for it. And I’m afraid that if I do somehow talk him into going, he’s gonna end up resenting me. I feel like he already does.”

This is the tricky part of being close friends with a couple. It’s one thing to be friends with one person and to get along okay with their significant other, then you have clearly defined loyalties. I don’t have that in this situation. I have two friends who are hurting, and struggling to communicate with each other. But they’re communicating with me. So now I have to decide if I should share something Holden confided in me or not. On the one hand, I don’t want to betray his trust. But on the other hand, maybe this is something Ryan needs to hear.

If he hasn’t already.

“Holden said that… he kind of feels like he’s an afterthought.” I tell Ryan gently. “Like you applied for this job without considering him or the baby.”

“That’s completely untrue!” He exclaims in disbelief. “Yeah, I really fucking want this job. But it’s not just because of how hard I’ve worked or how long I’ve waited for it. We have a decent life here. We have good friends, our families are all here, we both like where we work, and we have this place… but if I take this job, it could be so good for us. I mean, we’ve been worrying about how we’re going to get enough time off to spend with the baby, and how soon we’re going to have to go back to work. If I take this job, Holden wouldn’t even have to work if he didn’t want to! He could
stay home with the baby for as long as he wanted, and go back to work when he actually felt ready and not when his vacation days ran out. I thought that was what he wanted, but apparently he’d rather stay here and struggle.”

“I think it’s just hard for him to think about leaving his family and everything he’s ever known.”

“You did it.”

“I… well…” Crap. “I mean, yeah, kind of… but-”

“You left your whole family, your career, the town you grew up in, *everything* to move out here and be with Tommy.”

“It wasn’t *just* to be with Tommy… He was a *big* part of it, and I couldn’t have done it if I hadn’t had his support. But I’d always wanted to live out here, and my kids needed a fresh start. It wasn’t as simple as-”

“Okay, but say Tommy got offered his dream job, wouldn’t you go wherever he needed you to go?”

“That’s the great thing about being a musician, you can pretty much do it anywhere.” I point out semi-seriously, hoping to bring a little levity to the conversation (and avoid saying anything that might come across as me taking sides).

“You know what I mean. If he needed you to move away from L.A. for him, you’d do it, right?”

“We’ve got the kids to consider. They’re in school here and-”

“If you didn’t have kids, if it was just the two of you?”

Damnit.

How do I get myself into these situations? I should’ve just listened to Tommy and stayed the hell out of it.
“If it was just the two of us... yeah.” I reluctantly admit. “I’d go anywhere he asked me to.”

Ryan throws his hands up victoriously, as if what I’ve just said proves some kind of point. Which I guess it sort of does, if you’re someone who values my opinion. Like Holden…

Double damnit.

I already know it’s pointless to ask Ryan not to mention this conversation to Holden, but I do it anyway. I explain that I can see both sides of the situation, and I’m in no way taking sides. But even though he assures me that he understands and that he won’t use what I’ve just said as a way to try and sway Holden’s decision, I’d bet money that the next time they get into an argument about this move, my “I’d go anywhere for Tommy” confession is going to be used against Holden.

I spend the entire drive home debating whether or not I should text Holden and preemptively apologize for not keeping my nose out of his business. I can’t decide if that would in any way help the situation, or if it would constitute continued meddling on my part. I’ve already done enough damage for one day. I think the only way I can avoid making it worse is to keep my mouth (and text messages) shut.

The kids are still camped out in the family room when I finally make it home, which doesn’t surprise me. Unless we have plans as a family, or they have play dates set up, it’s not uncommon for them to spend an entire Saturday lounging around like this. I am a little surprised to find Tommy hanging out with them, though. Given his mood earlier today, I figured he wasn’t really interested in having any kind of company.

“How’d it go with Holden and Ryan?” He asks me without even looking away from the TV screen.

I should’ve known he’d know.

“I…” It’s not worth the effort to act as though I have no idea what he’s talking about. I’m busted. “Holden was at work, but Ryan and I talked a little...”

Tommy glances across the room at me, just long enough to assess how guilty I look. Apparently it’s written all over my face, or perhaps he’s just that good at seeing through my casual, carefree facade.
“Should’ve stayed out of it.” He concludes, shaking his head as he returns his attention to the movie the kids are engrossed in.

“I know.” I sigh regretfully, joining him on the couch. “Next time I’ll listen to you.”

He snorts softly in obvious skepticism. “I won’t hold my breath.”

“Hey, I can’t help the fact that I have an innate desire to see people be happy. Especially people I care about.”

“You can desire it all you want, doesn’t mean you always have to make everyone else’s happiness your responsibility.”

“I don’t?” I question in feigned surprise, to which his only response is a disapproving head shake.

“So what did you and Ryan talk about? What a dick he’s being?” He asks scathingly.

“No, he just told me his side of things.”

“His side of things is that he’s being a dick.”

I guess it’s clear whose side he’s on. “He’s not being a dick, though. I know Holden thinks he doesn’t care about what he wants, but it’s not like that. He genuinely believes that they could have a better life in New York, and this job is something he’s been working towards for years. He might not get another shot at it if he turns it down now.”

“You’re taking his side?” Tommy frowns incredulously, shifting away from me just enough to make it clear that I’m officially on shaky ground here. “He didn’t even ask Holden what he wanted before he applied for the job. And now he just expects him to pack up and move across the fucking country, and leave their family and friends when they’re about to have a baby.”

All I can do is shrug helplessly as I take in the disgusted look on his face. The way he’s staring at me right now makes me feel like I’m asking him to move to New York and leave our entire support system behind right when we’re about to need it the most.
“I’m not saying he handled it the right way, just that I can understand his side of things, too.”

“Well I think it’s bullshit.” He mumbles, folding his arms defensively across his chest and slumping against the couch cushions.

“Why are you taking this so personally?” I ask quietly, gently, trying to avoid getting into a fight with him when the kids are present. The fact that he’s already done so much cussing when there’s every chance one of them might hear us is evidence enough of just how upset he is. “You said it was none of our business, but you definitely seem to have a strong opinion on the subject.”

“Shitty, selfish people piss me off, that’s all.”

“You know Ryan isn’t a shitty, selfish person.”

He shrugs one shoulder, his gaze settling back on the TV as he throws out a dismissive, “Whatever”.

I know better than to push the issue any further, or to even attempt a subtle subject change (not that I can think of a way to subtly change the subject anyway). The best thing I can do for both of us right now is to let him be pissed off, whether I believe he has a good reason to be pissed off or not. Trying to change his mood at this point would only result in him withdrawing further. Deep down I’m aware that it’s not Ryan he’s pissed off at, not really, and it’s not me that he’s withdrawing from. That might be how it looks from the outside, but that’s not how it is. He’s pissed off about his mom being sick, and about the fact that so far none of the painful and exhausting treatments she’s undergone have made her even slightly better. He’s projecting that anger onto anyone or anything that upsets him in the slightest, and he’s withdrawing from the fear and uncertainty he feels. He’s trying to escape it, trying to stop it from becoming any more intense than it already is.

Somehow that translates to keeping everyone at arm’s length, including me.

Especially me.

I guess the more you love someone, the more pain they’re capable of causing you. I just wish I could make him see that I’m trying to protect him from feeling any more pain than he already has, and I would do anything to avoid causing him more. But I don’t think that’s something he’s capable of believing right now. Everything in his world holds the potential for more pain. The things that bring him the most joy have become the things that pose the greatest threat.
Nothing, noone, and nowhere is safe anymore.
I know. It's been 6 months, almost exactly, since I last updated this fic. I started writing this chapter a few days after that, but barely got a few paragraphs in before life got in the way. Being a mom is the best thing I've ever done, but it's definitely the most exhausting and time consuming, too. haha

I'm sure most people have given up on this fic, and probably assumed I had, too. But even though I don't have as much time to write anymore, and I have no idea when I'll be able to update again (less than 6 months from now, I promise!), I haven't abandoned it. <3

Because it has been so long, here's a little refresher:

-Taylor just got back from tour a couple of weeks prior to this chapter.
-Tommy's mom has cancer and so far none of the treatments she has received have helped. Tommy is, understandably, having a very hard time with it.
-Their surrogate, Shauntae, is just over 3 months pregnant with twins.
-Holden and Ryan are also using a surrogate to start a family, and are expecting one baby a couple of months before Tommy and Taylor's babies are due.
-Ryan has just received a job offer he has been wanting for years, but it requires him to relocate to NYC. Holden doesn't want to go, and was worried their marriage might be over because of how at odds they had been over it.

Hopefully that jogs your memory enough that this chapter won't be confusing!

Growing up, Thanksgiving was always a big deal in my family. In fact, any occasion that called for
copious amounts of food was a big deal. There were even a few occasions where food wasn’t traditionally a factor, but my family added some in there anyway. Hansons like to eat. That’s probably where my love of food and cooking stems from, and my love of Thanksgiving is likely tied to that, too.

So how do you take a holiday that arguably involves more food and eating than any other holiday, and add even more food and eating? You extend the length of the celebration!

We never did “Friendsgiving” when I was a kid. I’m not sure it was even a thing back then. But now it is a thing, so this year I decided we should have Friendsgiving and Thanksgiving. Two whole days of food, friends and family.

What could possibly go wrong?

Forget I said that.

The biggest difference this year, though, is the fact that I’ll be spending Thanksgiving in another state from all of my children. It was kind of a last minute decision. We had been planning to spend Thanksgiving in Tulsa, but just over a week ago Tommy decided that he didn’t want to go anymore. And I completely understood why; he wants to be with Dia.

Even though none of us want to say it out loud, I think we all know that there’s a good chance this might be the last Thanksgiving we get to spend with her.

I considered keeping the kids home, but they were so excited to see the rest of the family. Tommy told me that we should just go without him, that it was no big deal. Honestly, I couldn’t even tell if he was lying. I wanted to believe he was. I wanted to believe that he wanted me to stay, that he needed me here. I know that’s selfish, and it would be better if he truly felt strong enough to tackle all of this without me here to hold his hand. I guess what it comes down to is that I want to be here to hold his hand.

After mulling over our limited options for a few days, I had a stroke of genius. Or what would have been a stroke of genius if I’d thought of it sooner. It seemed like a pretty obvious solution when it finally did occur to me. I called up my little brother, Mac, and begged him to accompany the kids back to Tulsa for me. It involved changing his flight, which I agreed to pay for, but there was really no way for him to turn me down without feeling guilty.
And who wants to feel guilty on Thanksgiving?

So I packed up the kids and we picked up Uncle Mac on the way to LAX first thing this morning. For the next four days, Tommy and I have the house to ourselves for the first time in a very, very long time. I was planning on paying a sitter to be with the kids while we had dinner with our friends out on the patio this evening. But now that’s one less thing we have to worry about. And we won’t have to worry about the party going late or getting a little rowdy and keeping the kids awake, either. Tommy thinks I’m crazy for hosting an outdoor get-together at this time of year, but we’ve got a couple of patio heaters and a fire pit, and we can hand out blankets if those aren’t enough to keep people warm. Besides, the patio is the only place we can fit everyone! I’ve invited six people, and last time we talked about it Tommy was considering invites for a similar number of people.

“Okay,” Tommy sighs wearily as he traipses into the kitchen with Duke bouncing excitedly around his heels. I don’t know how that dog always knows when we’re expecting company, but he can definitely sense it. “The cooler’s full of ice and beer. What else do you want me to do?”

“Can you grab the blankets out of the movie room and the ones in the laundry closet, and put them downstairs, just in case people want them?”

“Sure.” He turns and almost trips over the dog, but manages to grab onto the wall and keep himself upright. “Jesus, Duke! Could you calm the fuck down for like five fucking seconds?”

“Probably not.” I chuckle softly in an effort to lighten his mood. “Oh, before I forget to ask again, is anyone you invited vegan, or vegetarian, or... gluten intolerant?”

“Nope.”

“I have plenty of vegetable dishes, but I can always whip up some more.”

“You’ve already made way more than enough.” He tells me, surveying the dozen or so side dishes littering the kitchen counters.

“I know it looks like a lot, but considering how many people we’re feeding.”

“How many people did you end up inviting? Ten?”
“No, just the six we talked about.”

“Then you made way more than enough.” He repeats matter-of-factly. “As usual.”

With a soft snort and a roll of my eyes, I turn my attention back to the food prep in front of me. “Excuse me for wanting to make sure our friends are fed and happy.”

“Our friends, our neighbors… every damn tourist on Hollywood Boulevard.”

“Very funny. There’s barely enough here to feed us and a dozen guests.”

“Yeah, which is still twice as much as we need.”

At first I don’t really register what he’s said. I heard the words, I understood the words… and yet somehow their meaning escaped me. But when it finally dawns on me what he’s saying, I drop my knife on the cutting board in front of me and spin around to face him.

“Who did you invite?”

“No one.” He shrugs, like it doesn’t even matter.

For a few seconds, all I can do is stare at him incredulously. “What about Isaac and Sophie? You must’ve at least invited them.”

“They probably went back to Washington to see Isaac’s family or something.”

“Probably? You didn’t even ask?”

“I forgot.” He mumbles. “Whatever, it’s not like it’s some huge loss or anything. We never spend any time with them anyway.”
I run a hand over my face as I take a beat and try to decide which of the many questions I have racing through my head right now is most pertinent. “They came to that party at the end of the tour, didn’t they? That was only a couple of weeks ago.”

“And it was the first time I’d seen either of them in months.”

“Well if you’d invited them tonight-”

“Why do I always have to be the one asking people to do stuff?” He snaps resentfully. “It’s like if I don’t make the call, I never fucking see anyone.”

“They probably just think you’re busy because we have the kids, and your mom’s been sick, and-”

Without a word, he turns to leave the room again. Apparently this conversation is over.

He wishes.

“Tommy!”

“What?” He groans without slowing his pace, forcing me to follow him through the dining room and down the hall. “You wanted me to go get the blankets, so I’m gonna go get the blankets.”

“We were kinda in the middle of something, in case you hadn’t noticed.”

“I don’t wanna talk about it anymore.”

“But-”

“Look, the conversation was about me and my friends, right?” He asks, coming to a stop so suddenly that I almost walk straight into him. “So I get to decide when it’s done, and I say it’s done.”
“That’s not how it-”

“You can keep talking about it if you want, but it’s gonna be a very one-sided conversation.” He informs me flippantly as he continues down the hall, leaving me staring after him speechlessly.

Great.

Looks like our first “Friendsgiving” is off to a warm and fuzzy start.

At least all the people I invited are friends with both of us. Hopefully once they get here, and the beer starts flowing, he’ll cheer up a bit and enjoy the evening. Not that I plan on letting his whole “nobody cares” bullshit stand; we’re definitely going to revisit that discussion sometime in the very near future. But for now I seem to have a bunch of extra food that I need to find room for in the fridge, and people will probably start arriving any minute, so debating how much my husband’s friends care about him is going to have to wait.

The first people to show up are Shauntae and Sam, which I find kind of amusing because they’re the only people I invited who have a kid. In my experience, having kids tends to make you late to a lot of things. Or everything.

Or maybe being me is what makes me late, and the kids have nothing to do with it.

“Are we the first ones here?” Sam asks in surprise as I take their jackets. “I thought we were going to be late!”

“We are late.” Shauntae points out, glancing down at her watch. “You said five and it’s almost five-fifteen.”

“I said five- ish .” I remind her playfully. “Hanson’s don’t do ‘on time’.”

My gaze happens to fall to Shauntae’s belly, and I notice that she has an actual baby bump now. It’s small, but it’s there! She’s only three and a half months along, and I’m used to having to wait until later in the second trimester to see even a small bump. But to be fair, there are two babies in there (a fact that I am still trying to wrap my head around on a daily basis). It makes sense that she’d start
showing early.

Apparently I don’t do a very good job of disguising my surprise, because when I look back up at her face, I can tell from the blush on her cheeks and the way she fusses with the front of her shirt that she feels a little self-conscious.

“I look fat.”

“No you don’t!” Sam tells her immediately, and something tells me it’s not the first time she’s had to argue that point recently. “You’re pregnant.”

“But I don’t look pregnant yet. I just look like I ate all of Stella’s Halloween candy.”

“You kinda did.” Sam teases her good-naturedly.

“You look great.” I assure her. “I promise.”

“Where’s Tommy?” Sam asks, glancing around the foyer as if she expects him to stroll in at any moment.

“He’s down by the pool getting stuff set up.” I think. Now that she mentions it, I have no idea if he’s out there. We can hope… “You guys can head on down, if you like. Do you need me to show you the way, or do you remember?”

“I think we’ve got it… if we get lost and can’t find our way back up here, we’ll text you.”

“Are you sure you don’t need any help with anything?” Offers Shauntae. “Can we at least carry something down for you?”

“Nope, thanks, I’ve got it covered. You go and relax.”

I watch for a moment as the two of them walk away, and just before they turn the corner and leave my hearing range, I catch an insecure sigh from Shauntae.
“I should have worn a looser shirt.”

Shaking her head in disagreement, Sam slides her arm around Shauntae’s waist and pulls her closer as they disappear from my view. “You look beautiful in the shirt you’re wearing.”

“You have to say that, you’re my wife.”

“It’s not like it was in our vows or anything.”

I can’t help but smile to myself as I make my way back to the kitchen, thinking about the many times I’ve had similar discussions with Tommy. Sometimes I’m the one needing reassurance about my appearance, but most of the time Tommy is the one feeling less than happy with how he looks. People think it’s only women who worry about whether or not they look fat, but I can tell you right now that’s far from true. Tommy has always been one of the most secure people I’ve ever known when it comes to who he is on the inside. But when it comes to how he looks on the outside… I don’t think I’ve ever known someone so blatantly gorgeous who feels so inadequate when they look in the mirror.

Not long after Shauntae and Sam have joined Tommy down by the pool, Alex and Z arrive. They don’t need to be told twice to make themselves at home, or worry about getting lost trying to find their way to the backyard, they’re more than familiar with us and our house by now. But almost as soon as I send them on their way, I start to wonder whether I should have warned them about Tommy’s foul mood. For all I know, he’s over it and is enjoying his evening. But if he’s not, and Alex starts pushing his buttons (as he so often tends to do), someone might end up getting their ass kicked right into the pool.

I’ve just fired off a text to Alex that reads “Be NICE to Tommy. Seriously.” when the doorbell rings again. There are only two other guests I’m expecting... but like Tommy, I have no idea what to expect when it comes to their moods. I haven’t really spoken to Holden or Ryan much since I stopped by their place the day after the end of tour party. I texted Holden right after my conversation with Ryan to give him a heads up that I may have said some things that could cause more tension between them, and I apologized for that profusely. But he texted me back to say that it was okay, and that he wasn’t mad. Then I didn’t hear anything else from him until a week later when I texted him to invite him to dinner tonight. And even then, all I got in response was a “thanks, we’ll be there.”

I pull open the door, plastering on the most hopeful smile I can muster as I greet them. “Hey guys!”
“Hey.” Ryan smiles back brightly, stepping past me into the foyer with Holden right behind him.

I immediately notice that they’re holding hands, and I try not to breathe a sigh of relief so audible that they’ll hear it. “I’m just finishing up with the food, but everyone else is down by the pool if you wanna join them.”

“Great.”

“Do you need a hand with anything?” Holden asks just as Ryan begins leading him away.

My automatic response is “no, I’ve got it”, but something about the look on his face prompts me to go against all my natural instincts and actually accept help when it is offered to me.

“Sure… thanks.”

“You go on out.” Holden tells Ryan with a small smile, kissing him on the cheek quickly before letting go of his hand. “I’ll be down in a minute.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, totally.”

After Ryan is out of sight, Holden seems to visibly deflate right in front of me. His shoulders slump and he exhales deeply, as though he’s exhausted from the effort of simply existing. This time instead of ignoring my instincts, I follow them. I take a step closer to him and pull him into a tight hug, and he immediately wraps his arms around me and gratefully returns the embrace.

“How’re you holding up?”

“I’ve been better.” He admits somewhat sadly, and I can feel his reluctance to let go as I pull back to look him in the eyes. “It’s been a long month.”

“Yeah…” With a small smile, I give a gentle tug on the sleeve of his jacket and nod towards the
kitchen. “Come on. I’ve got a secret stash of tequila and two shot glasses with our names on them.”

“Halleloo.” He smirks, already looking a little less crestfallen than he did only ten seconds ago.

We walk back through the dining room to the kitchen in silence, and neither or us speaks as I dig a bottle of tequila out from one of the upper kitchen cupboards. The shot glasses clink together as I pull them off of the shelf, and the sound seems much louder than usual in the quiet lingering between us. And much less celebratory than the sound of clinking shot glasses should.

I pour us both a generous shot and we quickly throw them back, wincing as the alcohol leaves a familiar burn in the backs of our throats. “You good or do you want another?”

“Maybe in a minute.” He places the shot glass in front of him on the kitchen island and studies it as he tips and spins it round and round between his fingertips on the butcher block. “So… I’m going.”

My heart immediately sinks, plummeting down into my gut as though someone just tied a cement block to it and threw it off of a cliff. I knew I would be disappointed if he decided to leave Los Angeles, but hearing him confirm that it’s happening… it’s more painful than I thought it would be.

“To New York?” I ask dumbly, like I’m hoping that he’ll tell me he’s just going down to the pool to join the party, not to the other side of the country.

It’s pointless and pathetic, but some part of me needs the confirmation.

“Yeah.” He sighs, picking up the bottle of tequila and pouring himself that second shot. And I waste no time shoving my own glass towards him, just in case there was any doubt that I needed another as badly as he does. “It’s for the best… I guess.”

He immediately lifts the glass to his lips, pouring the tequila into his mouth in what I assume is a hopeless attempt to numb the sting of those words.

“Are you sure?” I regret the question before I’ve even finished asking it. “I’m not trying to talk you out of it-”
“No, I know.” He assures me. “And no, I’m not sure. Of anything. But… I don’t know what else to do, Tay. He’s my husband, we’re having a baby… I don’t want to go, but I don’t want my marriage to be over. I don’t want our family to be over before it’s even really begun. I can’t ask him to turn this opportunity down. He worked so hard for it, and he wants it so badly... it’d be like signing our relationship’s death warrant if I made him stay here.”

“I know.”

“I mean… I have to try, right?”

I feel like he’s seriously asking me to approve the conclusion that he’s come to. Or maybe he’s asking me to do the opposite. All I know for sure is that he needs something from me right now, some kind of assurance that he’s doing the right thing, one way or the other. The pleading look in his eyes is so hard to take, so hard that I find myself averting my eyes to the kitchen island between us before I speak.

“You’re the only one who knows what’s right for you, even if it feels like you have no idea what that is right now. Deep down… you know.”

He nods contemplatively, returning his focus to his shot glass. “It’s not like we’re moving to another country.”

“Right.”

“And… I don’t hate New York. I mean, it’s not my favorite place in the world, and it’s not my first choice for a city to raise my kid in, but… it has its perks.”

“Definitely.” I agree wholeheartedly, thankful that I can finally say something encouraging and mean it one hundred percent. “New York is a great place. There are so many museums, and galleries, and restaurants. There’s always a show to go to, or something going on. It’s close to the ocean, and up state is gorgeous, especially in the fall. All of New England is, really. Plus, you’ll get snow! Your kid can build snowmen, and make snow angels, and go sledding in Central Park. They’d never get to do that here.”

“That’s true.” He offers me a faint, grateful smile. “It’ll be good...”
“Yeah.”

“You sound like I believe it?”

I throw an arm around his shoulders as we each grab a plate piled high with homemade burgers and vegetable skewers. “You’ll get there.”

Together we head downstairs to finally join the rest of the party, and I quickly get to work cooking dinner while everyone else lounges on pool chairs with their drinks. The sounds of cheerful chatter and boisterous laughter ring through our little corner of the otherwise quiet Hollywood Hills, and the cool evening air suddenly feels a little warmer to me.

Or maybe that’s the heat from the grill.

I’ll admit, as happy as it makes me to see some of my closest friends relaxing together and enjoying each others company, my brief conversation with Holden weighs heavy on my mind and makes it difficult for me feel completely present. I glance over my shoulder, smiling softly as Z practically spits her drink all over Tommy and Alex because of something hilarious that Ryan has just said. Holden chats amiably with Sam and Shauntae while Duke wriggles back and forth across the flagstone patio at their feet, receiving belly rubs and back scratches at every turn. Everything feels simple, just for a moment. But my smile fades when I realize that this is probably the last time we’ll all be hanging out together like this for a very long time.

My thoughts are so preoccupied with Holden and Ryan’s imminent departure from Los Angeles, that I come close to burning the food more than once. I don’t even realize someone is standing beside me until they speak, and it surprises me so much that the burger I was in the middle of turning almost goes flying through the air.

“Dinner almost ready?” Tommy asks as he takes a sip of his beer.

“Getting there.”

“I feel bad you have to be over here while we’re all hanging out.”

A sincere smile curls my lips, and I lean in to peck the corner of his mouth. “I don’t have to be over here, I choose to be. I could have just ordered pizza, but I like cooking for people. Even if it is just
burgers and stuff.”

“Smells good.” He notes approvingly as he picks up the barbeque fork on the end of the grill and starts poking idly at some of the food.

“Dude, you’re making holes in everything.”

“Shut up, I’m just… making sure the heat gets in.”

I feel laughter bubbling up in my chest for the first time all evening, and I curl my arm around his waist, pulling him nearer until his body rests against mine. “What would I do without you?”

“Use your lonely tears for lube while jerking off to gay porn, probably.” He snarks back, and I have to bite my lip for a moment to maintain my composure before replying.

“Yeah, that sounds like me.”

“But speaking of doing without people…” He eventually continues in a much more serious tone. “Did Holden tell you?”

“Yeah.” I reply sadly.

“It fucking sucks.” He mutters, his idle poking of random items on the grill gradually turning into something that looks more like stabbing.

“It does. I’m just trying to focus on the fact that at least their marriage isn’t over, and their baby won’t be born into a custody battle or something.”

“I guess.”

“Besides, they have family here, it’s not like they’re never coming back to visit.” I remind him as positively as I can, hoping to wipe the miserable expression off of his face. “And I know you hate New York, but there’s nothing stopping us from visiting them. In fact, we end up spending plenty of
time there when I’m doing promo stuff with the band anyway.”

“Yeah, I know, I just…”

“What?” I prod gently when his voice trails off, leaving his statement unfinished.

“Nothing.” He sighs as he puts the barbeque fork back where he got it from and picks up his beer to take another sip. “Nevermind.”

I try to stop him from walking away, but other than saying his name and reaching out for him a second too late, there’s not much I can do without drawing the attention of our friends. And he knows it. It’s probably why he did it. I swear that at least half of our conversations lately have ended this way. He’ll say something vague, or start to say something and then stop, and when I try to coax some kind of clarification from him, he’ll just shrug me off. Sometimes figuratively and sometimes literally.

Everything about him feels so… fractured. Fragmented. Sentences, even entire conversations go unfinished, feelings are only partially shared and then denied or dismissed. His emotions are out of hand one minute, and the next they’re so closely guarded that they’re smothered completely.

There’s a disconnect. Possibly with himself… definitely with me. Sometimes I’m convinced that whatever is causing it is out of his control, entirely unintentional. Other times it feels like he’s aware of what he’s doing.

I push those thoughts and fears aside, and return my focus to finishing dinner. As dusk begins to settle over us, I transfer all of the cooked food to the table while everyone takes their seats and begins passing plates and bowls back and forth. The comfortable commotion of it all is enough to brighten my mood and clear my mind, and I feel satisfaction replace some of the tension as I watch my friends eagerly digging into the deceptively simple looking meal that I spent hours preparing for them.

“Oh my god, this is so good.” Alex declares through a mouthful of potato salad. “What the hell did you put in this?”

“A chef never reveals his secrets.” I wink at him.

“I thought that was magicians?” Ryan corrects me.
“And ladies!” Z quickly chimes in with a devilish smirk. “But I’ve never been any good at keeping secrets, so I’m not sure what that makes me.” I notice movement beside her as Alex opens his mouth to comment. And apparently Z notices it too, because she clamps her hand over his mouth before he can make the slightest sound.

“You know, if you ever decide that making music isn’t for you, you should definitely consider a job in the culinary world.” Shauntae tells me. “I don’t think I’ve ever eaten anything you’ve made that didn’t taste amazing.”

“I’ve told him the same thing before, but he doesn’t believe me.” Tommy agrees with her before turning to me smugly. “See? An actual chef said it, so now you have to believe it.”

“No I don’t.”

“You’re so fucking impossible sometimes.”

“I love you, too.” I retort before blowing a playful kiss in his direction. “In fact… I love all you guys.”

The reactions around the table range from declarations of how sweet I am to demands to know how many drinks I’ve had. And as I pick up my beer and stand from my seat, I hear a very distinct groan from my adoring husband.

“Ah shit, here he goes…”

“Speech! Speech!” Sam cheers in amusement, prompting Holden to tap a fork against his glass.

“Don’t fucking encourage him!” Tommy chastises them semi-seriously. “He’ll never shut up if he thinks people actually want him to talk.”

“Just for that, I’m gonna draw this out even longer.” I beam proudly, earning myself an exaggerated scowl. “I know it’s not Thanksgiving until tomorrow, but we won’t be here like this tomorrow. So while I’ve got you all here, I just wanna tell you all how thankful I am to be able to call you my friends. Some of you I’ve known for years, some of you I’ve only known for a few months, but
every one of you has made my life better somehow. Some of you have even saved my life, in one
way or another.” I acknowledge frankly, my gaze settling on Alex, then Holden, and finally Tommy,
whose unimpressed stoicism has softened considerably since I started speaking. “If the last few years
have taught me anything, it’s that we can’t know what the future holds, and sometimes things happen
that we never could have expected and that we have absolutely no control over. But it’s also taught
me that, no matter how many challenges life throws our way, with the right people besides us, we
can get through just about anything. I know I’m incredibly lucky to have all of you in my corner, and
I want you all to know that no matter where you are, or what’s going on in your life, I’m in your
corner, too.”

Alex sniffs loudly and wipes away an imaginary tear. At least, I’m pretty sure it’s imaginary...
“Dude, I’m not wearing the right mascara for this!”

“On that note,” I laugh, rolling my eyes at him and raising my beer. “Happy ‘Friendsgiving’. ”

Everyone joins in my toast as the sound of bottles and glasses clinking together echoes across the
patio and into the November night air. I take my seat again while my friends return to their previous
conversations (and face-stuffing), and after a moment I lean towards Tommy, until I’m close enough
to speak so that only he will hear me.

“Was that succinct enough for you, honey?”

I’ve barely finished posing my question before his lips are pressed against mine in a delicate yet
deliberate kiss.

I’ll take that as a yes.
No, this is not an April Fools joke!

I'm guessing most of you thought I was never going to update again. Honestly, I thought I was never going to update again. Not that I didn't WANT to, I just never had the time. The first half of this chapter was written in November, and I hadn't opened the document again since, even though the second half of the chapter had been written (in my head) for the last 4 months.

But then a couple of days ago someone left a comment on here. When I got the email notification it took me totally by surprise, and then I was almost afraid to read it because I assumed it was going to be someone bitching me out for never finishing this story. And they would be completely justified in doing so.

But it was someone telling me how much they loved it and missed it, even though they understand that my real family has to take priority over a fictional one. <3

It's not like I don't think about this story ALL the time and hate myself for not finishing it. In fact, a couple of weeks ago I almost came on here and officially declared it dead so that anyone who was still waiting for an update would know for sure that there wouldn't be one.

But... here we are.

I'm not saying that I'm going to update again any time soon. Or ever. And I totally understand if the few people who were still reading this last year have since lost all interest, or are unwilling to dedicate any more time to a fic that may never be finished.

But for anyone out there who's still along for this incredibly slow moving ride...
The rest of the evening is so perfect, it almost feels like I’m existing in some kind of dream. Even during some of the best moments I’ve experienced in recent months, I don’t think I’ve felt this content. There was always this underlying feeling of tension or impending angst. And while I know that the tension and angst haven’t gone anywhere, I wasn’t as aware of them tonight. Maybe it was the alcohol, or maybe it was the sound of some of the people I love most in the world raucously laughing to the point of tears…

Or maybe my brain just needed a break from the anxiety so badly that it gave up on trying to quiet the nagging, nervous voice in my head. Instead of trying to reason with it or reassure it, it slammed a door in its face and refused to acknowledge its existence.

Whatever the reason, I’m immeasurably grateful for it.

After dinner I insist of taking the dirty plates and leftover food back up to the kitchen so that it’s not all sitting there, staring at me from the table for the rest of the night. I can’t stand the thought that it’ll still be right there waiting for me once everyone has gone home, when all I’ll want to do is crawl into bed and sleep until turkey time. Everyone tries to talk me out of cleaning up, and when it becomes clear that I cannot be dissuaded, a few of them offer to help. I assure them all that I’m fine handling it alone, and for the most part there’s no argument because they’re more than happy to stay right where they are and continue enjoying their drinks and each others company.

But on my second round trip to the kitchen, Alex refuses to let me make the trek without him. He practically wrestles a stack of dirty plates out of my arms and heads indoors without responding to a single one of my protests.

So I quit making them and follow him upstairs with the remainder of the leftovers.

He’s abnormally quiet as I rinse off the plates and hand them to him to put in the dishwasher beside me. Every so often I happen to catch his eye, and he smiles, but it doesn’t look or feel genuine. I don’t get the sense that he’s upset, but I can definitely tell that something is going on with him. I’m just going to have to wait for him to figure out how and when to fill me in on what that something is.

By the time the last dish has been placed in the dishwasher, and I’ve finished wiping down the countertops around the sink in an effort to give him a few extra minutes to find the words, I have to fight the urge to straight up demand that he spit it out. But the fact is, Alex is someone who I’ve never had to drag information out of. He’s pretty much an open book, at least with me. So if he’s struggling with whether or not he’s ready to share something with me, that something must be a big
deal for him. I’m not going to force him to say anything he’s not ready to say, no matter how curious all of this apprehensive silence and his sidelong glances have made me.

“Okay… I think we’re good here,” I tell him, giving the kitchen an appraising once over before wiping my hands on a nearby dish towel and making a move towards the dining room.

“Can I show you something?”

I chuckle uncertainly as I turn to face him again. “Uh… sure. As long as that something isn’t in your pants.”

“Damn.” He sighs, his shoulders slumping in disappointment. “Nevermind then.”

“Alex-”

“No, no.” Holding his hands up, he shakes his head and starts to walk past me. “You made yourself perfectly clear. If you don’t wanna see what’s in my pants, that’s your loss.”

I step in front of him, blocking his path to the exit, and after making a show of trying to side step to get around me a few times, he feigns a reluctant surrender. Out of the corner of my eye, I notice his hand move. Slowly, so slowly… lower and lower… and just when it looks as though he’s about to unzip his fly, he detours to his pocket. I watch closely as he carefully retrieves a small, black velvet bag and hands it to me, and it takes me a couple of seconds to stop staring at it and take it from him. Once I’ve loosened the draw strings, I turn the bag upside down and tip its contents into my hand…

And when a delicate diamond ring falls into my palm, I find myself completely speechless.

“So?”

“I…” My eyes dart up to meet his, noting the blatant trepidation that I can see and feel emanating from him. I’m not sure if I’ve ever seen that look in his eyes before. His obvious nerves leave me feeling nervous and desperately trying to think of a way to shake the butterflies that have somehow taken up residence in my stomach. “You know I’m already married, right?” The moment he exhales a soft, relieved breath of laughter, I immediately feel lighter, too. “And as pretty as this ring is… I’m not really all that into diamonds.”
“Okay, well… I guess I’ll just give it to Z or something.” He shrugs nonchalantly, taking the ring out of my hand and dropping it back into its bag. “Think she’ll like it?”

“Dude…” I shake my head at him in disbelief as a grin spreads across my face.

“I know.”

“Are you seriously gonna ask her to marry you?”

“Why?” He frowns worriedly. “You think she’ll say no?”

“No! It’s not that, it’s just… I don’t know, I guess I never thought I’d see the day when Alexander Greenwald would settle down.”

“I’m not settling down.” He insists almost proudly. “That’s the best part. Neither of us wants to do the whole kids, and a dog, and a little house on the prairie thing. No offense.”

“None taken. I don’t want a little house on the prairie either.”

“We both want to keep making music, and touring, and… being who we are and what we are. We don’t wanna become something else just because we reach a certain age, and all our friends are having kids and moving to the ‘burbs. No offense.”

“I don’t live in the ‘burbs.” I pout playfully, earning myself an eye roll from him. “But I get what you’re saying. The two of you are totally right for each other.”

“Right? I just… I’ve never been with someone this long without feeling restless, or things getting stale. I used to think I was gonna be one of those sad, eternal bachelors. Like Hef, but without the mansion and the smoking jacket.”

“And the Bunnies.”
He scowls. “I could have Bunnies if I wanted.”

“Sure.”

“The point is I don’t need Bunnies, because I’ve got Z. And she’s hotter than any playmate Hef has ever had. And she’s funny, and sweet, and adventurous, and brave, and—”

“She’s everything good and right in this world, I get it. So when are you gonna ask her?”

“I don’t know…” He sighs wearily as he slumps against the kitchen counter behind him. “I’ve had this ring for like a month. I want it to be special, but I don’t want it to be cliche. I don’t think she’d want roses, and champagne, and me in a tux—”

“But you look good in a tux.”

“I do look good in a tux…” He muses. “Okay, maybe I’ll wear a tux. But can I wear a tux without getting her roses, and champagne, and taking her out to a four course dinner at a five star restaurant?”

“Why are you asking me?” I laugh softly. “I know I’ve been married twice, but I suck at proposing. My proposal to Natalie was only as romantic as it needed to be for her to think I sincerely wanted to marry her. It was a lie. And the first time I proposed to Tommy was totally out of the blue, post-sex, while watching Obama re-election coverage on CNN. And it resulted in him calling me crazy and fleeing the building.”

He seems to consider this for a moment, but it doesn’t appear to convince him that I don’t have all the answers. “What about the second time?”

“The second time wasn’t even a proposal. I dedicated a song to him at that show in New York, remember? He thought it was a proposal, and we couldn’t agree on whose turn it was to propose, so we basically decided to get engaged without either of us having to actually pop the question.”

“That’s so fucking Tommy. Lazy, unsentimental jackhole.”

“It was a joint decision!”

“Nine. Zac was six.”

“Whatever. I refuse to believe you, of all people, wanted to skip getting down on one knee.”

“Who says I didn’t get down on one knee?” I smirk devilishly. “Or both knees.”

He gives me a gentle shove as he tries to suppress a smile. “Hey, back off the dirty jokes and innuendo. That’s my thing.”

“Listen, dirty jokes and innuendo aside… yeah, maybe originally some part of me wanted it to be something bigger, something I planned out to the last detail to be what I thought was the perfect moment. But it ended up being perfect in its own way. It wasn’t how I would have planned it, but being with Tommy has taught me that nine times out of ten, it’s the stuff you don’t plan that ends up being the most special and memorable. Besides, I know now that if I was going to ask him to marry me, it shouldn’t have been my idea of the perfect proposal. I should’ve done it on his terms, in a way he would’ve appreciated. And for Tommy, that’s low key, no frills and no fuss.”

“See? This is why I came to you.” He places a hand on either side of my face, pulling me towards him and planting an exaggerated kiss to my forehead. “You’re my Yoda!”

“Bullshit that is.”

“When you two are done making out, could you grab another six pack and get your asses back outside? Some of us aren’t done drinking.”

Alex and I jump apart in surprise, turning towards the sound of Tommy’s voice. Thankfully he doesn’t seem too pissed to have walked in on Alex laying one on me, despite the uncharacteristically guilty expressions on both of our faces. I think he’s just drunk enough to be past the point of caring. Or close to it.

God bless beer.
“How long have you been standing there?” Asks Alex, almost all of the color absent from his face.

“Long enough to see you macking on my husband.” Tommy replies pointedly, folding his arms across his chest. “But I’ve seen that so many times, I’m kinda numb to it.”

“Really?”

“No, you asshole!” He snatches the dish towel from the countertop where I left it and snaps it at Alex’s crotch. “Go find another leg to hump.”

With his hands cupped protectively over the front of his pants, Alex throws one last wink my way before retreating back down to the patio. Tommy glares after him, standing in front of me like some kind of over-protective guard dog, until eventually he seems satisfied that the threat has passed.

“I’m gonna buy a fucking cattle prod one day, I swear. Anytime that motherfucker so much as looks at you, he’s gonna get a thousand volts right in the junk.”

“I’m pretty sure cattle prods have a higher voltage than that.” I laugh softly, draping my arms around his waist and pulling him towards me as he continues his melodramatic fuming.

“Even better!”

“Have I ever mentioned how hot you are when you get all territorial like this?”

I spot a flicker of a smile fighting to form on his lips, but he forces it away in favor of maintaining a petulant pout. “I shouldn’t need to get territorial.”

“You don’t.” I assure him, even though we both know that he’s already fully aware of that fact. “I think you just enjoy it.”

“Fuck you!” He grumbles, giving me a pathetic shove that’s in no way forceful enough to actually put any distance between us. “Would you enjoy walking in on some other guy kissing me?”
“On the forehead?”

“Whatever. No one else’s lips should be anywhere on your body.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Especially not that dickwad’s.”

“No, sir.”

“Stop getting off on this!” He demands, finally losing the valiant fight he put up against his own amusement.

“You first.” I smirk at him playfully, gladly allowing him to force me up against the wall beside us.

His lips hovering mere inches from mine, so close that I can smell the alcohol on his breath. So close that I can practically taste it, and I swear it’s leaving me a little lightheaded.

But just when I think he’s about to eliminate the space between us and kiss me the way I’m longing for him to, he pushes himself away from me. I stare at him in open-mouthed indignation as he takes another step back, the corner of his mouth curling into a devilish smile.

“Don’t forget to bring some more beer out with you after you’ve…” His eyes flit pointedly to my groin for a second. “Calmed down.”

“Tommy!”

“That’s Sir to you.” He calls back to me as he saunters out of the room.

Damn.
While I’m hanging out by myself in the kitchen, waiting for certain parts of my anatomy to give up on getting what they want and go away, the only thing I can think about is how badly I want everyone to go home so I can have Tommy all to myself. But that kind of thinking doesn’t exactly speed up the whole “calming down” process, so I force myself to think about something else. It’s not like other subjects are in short supply, there’s plenty going on in my life. So much that the only difficulty I have when it comes to taking my mind off of Tommy is choosing what else to think about out of the many possibilities.

My mind races from Alex and Z’s impending engagement, to Holden and Ryan’s relocation, to Dia’s health problems, to wondering how the kids are doing in Tulsa, to our twins growing in Shauntae’s belly, and the fact that we still have so much to figure out and so little time to do it…

The floodgates of anxiety have officially reopened in my mind, and by the time I venture back down to the patio, having some one-on-one time with Tommy is the furthest thing from my mind.

It’s well after midnight when the last of our guests says their goodbyes and the house falls eerily quiet for the first time in hours. All I really want to do is drag myself up to bed, but I can't. Not until I go back downstairs and drag Tommy up there with me. If I leave him to his own devices, there’s a good chance he’ll pass out on one of the sun loungers and freeze his non-existent ass off.

Sure enough, I find him draped languidly over the same chair he was sprawled across when I left to see Alex and Z out. He’s so still that, for a moment, I wonder if he’s already asleep. But as I make my way further out onto the patio, I can see that his eyes are still open and he’s just… staring. At what, I have no idea.

“Wanna head inside?” I suggest hopefully.

“Not yet.”

I contemplate the idea of taking a seat on the sun lounger beside his. It definitely looks inviting. But I know I’m not going to be able to make myself get up again if I do that, and one of us needs to stay upright or neither of us will be sleeping in our bed tonight.

I take a quick inventory of my surroundings, noticing a few empty beer bottles and wine glasses I could clean up. And then I see the dining table and chairs, and I start to wonder when the hell I’m gonna find the time to put them away if I don’t get it over with now. So, with a deep breath, I make my way purposefully over to them.
“Can’t that wait til tomorrow?” Tommy whines pathetically, as though he’s being forced to fold chairs.

“It already is tomorrow.” I point out, smirking at him over my shoulder

“You know what I mean.” He sighs. “Just leave it.”

“If I don’t do it now, I’m gonna forget to do it before we go to Lisa’s tomorrow. And then I’m gonna be too stuffed with Thanksgiving food to want to do it when we get home.”

“So do it Friday. Or Saturday. Or never. Who fucking cares?”

“It’s like you don’t know me at all.” I tease him lightly. “You know, if you helped I’d be done a lot faster.”

“You’d be done a lot faster if you just left it.”

I roll my eyes at his persistence as I finish folding another chair and prop it up against the others. “I wouldn’t be ‘done’, I’d be in dereliction of duty.”

“And who’s gonna hold you accountable? The only person making you put away chairs right now is you.”

I know he’s right, but I also know that I wasn’t exaggerating when I said that if I don’t do this now, there’s no telling when it’ll get done. Days will turn into weeks, weeks to months… the guilt and shame will haunt my dreams, until eventually I’ll end up down here six months from now at two o’clock in the morning, putting chairs away in my underwear!

I figure I may as well just get it over with now, while I’m fully dressed, and save myself the trouble.

“Hey, look!” He calls out to me suddenly.
“What?”

“Up there.”

I look up to the sky, trying to see what he’s pointing at… but all I see is the moon and maybe one or two stars. “You’re drunker than I thought.”

“I’m serious! You don’t see it?”

“See what?” I chuckle softly as I abandon my responsible adult act and walk over to his pool chair. “You’re not even pointing at anything, you’re just… pointing.”

“I’m not, it’s right there!” He insists earnestly, wildly waving his non-pointing hand at me in an effort to draw me even closer. And as soon as I’m within arms reach, he grabs ahold of my shirt and yanks on it so purposefully that I all but fall on top of him. “GOTCHA.”

“You’re a bad influence.” I chuckle, steadying myself with one hand on either side of him as I feel him part his legs beneath me until my body is nestled snugly between them.

His fingers find the first fastened button on my shirt and quickly undo it. “You ain’t seen nothing yet.”

“Are you seriously trying to take my clothes off? Outside? In November?”

“November in L.A.” He scoffs dismissively, his eyes trained purposefully on the next button on my shirt. “And are you seriously trying to stop me?”

Not even a little bit.

I probably should, for a multitude of reasons… but then his lips are on my neck, and his hips are rocking against mine while his fingers continue their hasty unbuttoning. It makes it impossible for me to remember what any of those reasons are.
In only a matter of minutes, he has my belt undone, and my jeans unzipped and halfway down my legs. I toe off my shoes and wriggle the rest of the way out of clothes, kicking them aside without my mouth leaving his for even a second. But when my body settles back over his, and I feel the fabric of his clothes against my exposed skin, I force myself to break away from his hungry kisses in order to remedy that issue.

He doesn’t even give me the chance to try to take his t-shirt off, he yanks it over his head and carelessly casts it aside before I can so much as reach for the hem. So instead I turn my attention to basically pulling his pants off without bothering to do anything more than unbuckling his belt. His underwear takes even less work, and suddenly I’m the one who’s (barely) overdressed. He’s so torn between kissing me and removing my boxers that he’s only doing either one halfway. It’s like he can’t bear to tear his mouth away from mine for the five seconds it would take to pull my underwear the rest of the way off, but he wants me naked now. At one point he actually whines in frustration, and I can’t keep myself from laughing softly against his lips.

After several moments of desperate fumbling and tugging on my remaining articles of clothing, there’s absolutely nothing between us. It briefly crosses my mind that this is the first time I’ve ever been completely naked out here. We’ve fooled around before, but it’s mostly been in the hot tub, so we’ve never really been visible in the event that anyone happens to look. Between the cool evening breeze and the thought that someone might be able to see us, or even just hear us, I feel a shiver run through me. It leaves goosebumps in its wake and makes me want to be even closer to him than I already am, than I ever possibly could be.

But that’s nothing new.

I can tell he feels the same. From the possessive way his hands grasp at my arms and my back, and tangle themselves in my hair, to the needy moans he breathes into my mouth and against my bare skin.

Just as suddenly as all of my worries came rushing back to me a few hours ago, he’s made them disappear again. I feel like I have some kind of emotional whiplash or vertigo. My head is spinning, everything is spinning, and nothing makes sense to me in this moment. Nothing but him.

He’s the thing that sent me reeling, and still the one thing keeping me grounded.

I willingly follow his lead, and readily take the lead whenever he wants to relinquish control to me. Until finally I’m inside him, and I can’t tell the difference anymore. We move together so effortlessly, I don’t feel as though I’m leading or following. It’s both and it’s neither.
The sound of him gasping and moaning fills my mind, reverberating off of the hills around us, echoing through the still night air. There’s no doubt in my mind that my own moans are mingled with his, and knowing me they’re probably twice as loud. But he’s all I can hear. All I can see, and feel, and taste…

He’s everything.

After feeling so disconnected from him lately, and failing to find a way around the invisible wall that he’s been slowly, and possibly deliberately constructing between us, I want this moment to last longer than I know it can. We’re both right here, completely in this moment together, and there’s nothing standing between us physically or emotionally.

At least, that’s what I assumed.

I trail kisses along his jawline until my lips find his, and he kisses me back as eagerly as he can, but eventually we’re forced to part in order breathe. My forehead falls against his, and my eyes immediately search for his only to find them closed.

“Look at me.” I plead, but it’s like he can’t hear me. Or doesn’t want to. “Tommy…”

I hear him make a noise somewhere in between his ragged breathing and unrestrained moans. It’s a sound of protest, only there’s no trace of defiance to it.

It’s nothing but helplessness.

“Open your eyes.” I swear they’re screwed even more tightly shut than they were before I spoke. “Please.”

I don’t want to do anything to hurt him in any way, and I don’t want him to do anything that he doesn’t want to do. But I do want him to want to look at me, to let me in. I’m as close to him as I can get, I felt so close to him… but suddenly he seems so far away.

Until he opens his eyes and allows them to lock onto mine the way he always used to in moments like this. I’m immediately overwhelmed, so much so that if I had any breath right now, it would have been taken away. It’s like I’m feeling everything that I see in his eyes, everything he’s feeling. I can tell that he’s terrified of letting me see it, letting me see him, but at the same time he wants it more
than anything.

“I’m here.” I promise him adamantly. “I’m right here.”

The words have barely left my mouth before his eyes slam shut again and he cries out, his body tensing and trembling beneath mine as he comes. And when I surrender to my own release, my body is flooded with so many conflicting feelings and emotions that I can barely even tell if one of them is pleasure.

It takes me a while to catch my breath and find the strength to even attempt to shift my body off of his. But the second I start to pull away he stops me, holding me against him so tightly that it’s impossible for me to move.

“I’m not going anywhere.” I murmur against his ear, leaving tired kisses across his shoulder as I feel his grip on me begin to loosen enough that I can reach over the side of the sun lounger and retrieve one of the blankets that he brought out here earlier this evening.

As I carefully lie down beside him and cover us both up, it occurs to me that this is the first time since I came home from tour that he’s really allowed me to hold him like this. I guess I was aware of it on some level, but lying here with his head over my heart and his legs tangled with mine, the difference in his demeanor is so obvious.

It strikes me like a kick in the chest.

Having him cling to me the way he is right now only makes it painfully apparent just how much distance he’s actually managed to put between us lately. And I feel like an idiot for letting him, for giving him space and telling myself that it was okay. That no matter what happened, we’d be okay.

It’s not okay. He’s not okay.

And if I’m being completely honest with myself… we’re not okay, either.
I’m thirty-five years old.

I was seventeen the first time I got drunk. That’s eighteen years of drinking I’ve got under my belt, over half of my life. You would think that I would’ve learned by now where that fine line is between the good kind of drunk and the fucking stupid kind.

You would be wrong.

Well… not wrong, exactly. I know where the line is. I just don’t seem to be able to stop myself from stumbling right over it. Which is ridiculous, because I know myself. I know the many different Tommy’s there are, and how many drinks it takes to lure each one of them out of their dank, dark little hole.

There’s One Beer Tommy, who’s generally happier than No Beer Tommy, but it depends on the company he’s in. There’s Three Beers Tommy, who’s relatively chatty and friendly, and usually pretty decent to be around. There’s Four Beers and Two Shots Tommy, who tends to get a little
rowdy and has been known to be a bit of an asshole. And at the very far end of the spectrum is One Shot Shy of Alcohol Poisoning Tommy, who can barely fucking stand up, let alone walk, and speaks some garbled language that kinda resembles English. That Tommy has very rarely put in an appearance over the years, and whenever he did, I thankfully wasn’t able to remember most of the shit he pulled when I woke up the next day.

I also couldn’t remember where I was or how I got there, but that’s a story for another… never.

Anyway, like I was saying, in between the asshole drunk and the incomprehensible drunk, there are several other Tommys. There’s One Beer and Three Shots Tommy, who mauls married musicians in New York dive bars, for example. But the one who showed up to ruin the party for me last night was the one who can walk and talk like a normal person (mostly), but has a serious problem with not saying and doing stupid shit that he later regrets.

It’s been a long time since I’ve had to do the morning after stealth escape, because it’s be a long time since I’ve wanted to. I only ever sneak out of bed first thing in the morning so that Taylor can sleep in. It’s for his benefit, not mine. But right now, as I gingerly lift his arm away from my body just enough to allow me to inch out from under it, it’s one hundred percent for my benefit.

And I hate it.

I hate that I feel guilty, and ashamed, like I’m trying to ditch some meaningless one night stand and avoid having that awkward early morning “this was fun, let’s never do it again” chat. That’s not what this is. That’s not what we are, we never have been. Not even when he was married and I wanted to avoid falling for him at all costs. Not once have I ever regretted sleeping with him, or wished that I could go back and make a different choice.

Until now.

I finally manage to ease myself off of the sun lounger without him stirring at all, and then I grab one of the blankets on the ground to cover myself up. Because it’s fucking cold out here! Add ‘sleeping outside, naked, in November’ to the seemingly endless list of stupid things that I regret doing.

I try to stop myself from looking at him before I leave, because I know it’ll only make me feel worse than I already do. But I hate myself, so of course I fucking look. The second my gaze falls on his face, my mind flashes back to last night, to him begging me to look at him, to me opening my eyes even though I wanted to keep them closed. To keep him out.
I hate myself for letting him in the way I did, as much as I did.

And I hate myself for ever shutting him out to begin with. But I need to.

I know that probably sounds crazy. I spent so much time learning how to let him in, learning how to be completely open with him, and allowing myself to trust him and rely on him in a way that I’ve never trusted or relied on anyone else in my whole life. And now I’m trying to take some of it back somehow.

Because the way I love him, the way I need him… it’s too much. It scares the shit out of me. For a while there, after I finally let down the walls and got past all of my intimacy bullshit, it felt so fucking good. I’d never been so deeply connected to someone before, I didn’t know that I could be, that I was capable of feeling the things I felt for him.

Only now that connection doesn’t feel special, it feels… unsafe.

I don’t know how to be without him. I don’t know if I can be without him. We’re totally twisted and knotted up together. I can’t figure out where I end and he begins, it’s like it’s all the same thing. I need to untangle myself from him. I need there to be some kind of separation between us. I’m not saying I want us to separate like break up or anything, that’s the last thing I want.

But shit happens.

I didn’t want him to get hit by a car, but he did. I didn’t want my dad to die, but he did. I don’t want my mom to have cancer, but she does. You can’t just will things not to happen, that’s not how life works. And if he up and left me tomorrow, or something happened to him… I don’t even know what that would do to me. The way things are right now, I’m pretty sure that I wouldn’t know how to function if he was suddenly just… gone. It’s like I can’t comprehend the idea of a world without him in it, of my world without him in it. Which is stupid. I spent most of my life without him in it, I know that I’m capable of living without him. Or I was, once upon a time. Everything’s different now, though. I’m different because of him. I can’t go back.

Except… what if I have to? What if I don’t get any say in it?

I have to figure out how to be okay if he’s not around to hold my hand, and the only way I know how to do that is to force us both to let go. But no matter how many times I try to step away from him, I keep getting pulled back in. I keep letting myself get pulled back in.
Because he’s him, and I can’t get enough of the way it feels to be close to him.

That’s the problem. That’s why I fucked up last night.

Well, that and the alcohol.

If I hadn’t done that last shot with Alex and Z, maybe I would have been a different Tommy. A smarter Tommy. The kind of Tommy who can fuck his husband on a sun lounger without turning into a clingy, emotionally fragile woman afterwards.

And maybe I wouldn’t feel like throwing up in the pool.

Or like the San Andreas Fault has relocated to my fucking skull, and Dwayne ‘The Rock’ Johnson is about to show up in a helicopter and start pulling people out of it with those mutant arms of his.

With one last masochistic glance at Taylor, I drag myself across the flagstone to the patio doors, thanking any higher power that may exist that the kids are in another state right now. And forgetting that our insane dog isn’t. The second I open the door, he shoves his nose out and tries to use his head to force it open even further. But if I let him, he’s going to run right over to that sun lounger and jump on Taylor.

No fucking way.

“ *In!*” I demand as loudly as I dare, sticking my knee into the gap and using it to push him back inside. “Duke, stay!”

I somehow manage to slip into the house and shut the door again without him escaping, and then I have to try not to trip over him or my blanket all the way up to the bedroom. I’ve never felt the need for a shower so badly. It’s like I can already feel the hot water soothing my aching body and warming up my cold skin before I even set foot in the bathroom. And I suddenly feel like shit for leaving Taylor out there. I mean, it wasn’t literally freezing, and he had a blanket…

But if I’d woken him up, I wouldn’t be about to hop into the shower right now. I’d be having a conversation that I would prefer to never have.
Something else I wish I could put off is going to my sister’s house for dinner. And not just dinner, but for half the goddamn day leading up to dinner. Because it’s Thanksgiving, and apparently that means we’re obligated to spend unnecessary amounts of time together. I don’t wanna sit around all day watching some dumbass parade on TV, or playing pointless games, or wondering if my mom is even gonna be able to keep her dinner down once we finally get around to eating it.

I know I sound like a totally ungrateful jackass right now. I have an amazing husband, and awesome kids, and an incredible home, and twins on the way. I have a lot to be thankful for, way more than most people.

But my mom has basically been dying a slow death right in front of me for months now, and it’s probably not gonna get any better any time soon. Or ever. So forgive me if I’m not in a very thankful mood.

My unthankful mood only gets worse when I hear the bedroom door open, and Taylor telling Duke to stay out in the hall before he shuts it again.

Fuck my life.

So much for that amazing shower I was about to take.

“Hey.” He smiles at me as he steps into the bathroom, wrapped in a blanket of his own. “Took me a minute to figure out where I was this morning.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“How come you didn’t you wake me up before you came in?”

“I just… figured you could use the sleep.” I shrug. “We were up pretty late, and it’s probably gonna be a long day.”

He nods for a moment, looking around the room as though he’s searching for something else to say. “Were you about to take a shower?”
Yes. “Actually, I was gonna get dressed and take Duke for a run or something.”

“Oh.”

“He’s gonna be cooped up inside all day while we’re gone, so…”

“Right. Well… I could come with you?” He offers hopefully.

“You haven’t gone for a run in like a year.” I snort softly as I step past him to get out of the bathroom and grab some clothes. “You’ll probably keel over in less than a mile, and I don’t have the upper body strength to carry your ass home.”

“So tie me to Duke’s leash and let him drag me back here like the sled dog he thinks he is.” He jokes.

“Why don’t you just stay here? Take a long shower, make yourself some coffee so strong that it would be considered undrinkable by pretty much anyone else on the planet.”

“Sure.” He smiles, but it’s almost imperceptible. “These are a few of my favorite things.”

I can’t stand seeing the rejected look in his eyes, so I pull a t-shirt over my head to block it out for a couple of seconds. “Knock yourself out, Maria. Maybe whip us up some strudel for breakfast?”

“Yeah, maybe…”

On my way to the door, I quickly lean in and peck him on the lips in an attempt to get him to smile for real. But before I can get far enough away, he grabs my hand and holds me back.

“We… I need to talk to you.”

Shit. “About…?”
He stares at me, and I can hear every single thing he wants to say to me without him even having to open his mouth. It takes every last shred of self control I have to stop myself from pulling out of his grasp and getting the fuck out of here as fast as I can.

Lucky for me, Duke is as eager to get out of this house as I am right now, and he starts whining and scratching at the bottom of the bedroom door. I feel Taylor’s grip on me loosen, until eventually he lets go entirely.

“Nevermind. It can wait.” He sighs wearily. “Have a good run.”

“Thanks.” I smile, hoping I don’t look as relieved as I feel. “Have a good shower.”

I don’t need to be told what an asshole I’m being, fuck you very much; I’m one hundred percent aware of that fact. But sometimes you have to be, you know? Sometimes being an asshole is the only way to get what you want, what you need. Other people won’t hear you if you’re nice about it, if you say please, and let them make the choice instead of telling them how it’s gonna be.

It’s not like I’m enjoying this. It’s just one of those things I know I have to do, whether I want to or not. Like driving, or paying taxes, or having to reassure Netflix that, yes, I am still fucking watching, so just play the next damn episode already!

At least this is just temporary. I won’t have to treat Taylor this way forever. Eventually he’s gonna get it, and he’ll back off just enough for me to be able to figure out how to stop relying on him so damn much and deal with the hard stuff alone again, and then I can stop being an asshole.

I hope.

My run with Duke ends up being a walk, much to his dismay. I intended to run, but I feel like crap this morning, and running for even sixty seconds made me wanna collapse on the side of the road. It was like I could feel my brain bouncing off of the inside of my skull or something, and I’m pretty sure that’s not supposed to happen. But despite how crappy I feel, I still force myself to take Duke on the longest walk I can reasonably justify. I tell myself I’m being a good pet owner, but really I’m being a shitty husband.

I practically sneak back into the house, breathing a sigh of relief that there’s no sign of Taylor anywhere in sight. As soon as I let Duke off of his leash and tell him to stay (which he will do for all
of two seconds after I’ve turned my back on him), I hurry upstairs and lock myself in the bathroom to take a shower. And wash my hair. I washed my hair a couple of days ago, and usually I’d leave it another couple of days before doing it again. But what the hell, it’s Thanksgiving, right?

Plus it buys me an extra two or... ten minutes.

Once I’ve dried off and dressed, I know I have no excuses left to avoid going downstairs and facing Taylor. I can’t believe I’m fucking hiding from him like this. I mean, it’s not like I’ve never tried to avoid having certain conversations with him, but this is one of the more pathetic attempts I’ve made at putting off the inevitable. I just don’t know what I’m supposed to tell him. I don’t wanna lie, and there’s a decent chance he’ll be able to tell if I do anyway. But if I tell him the truth, he’ll probably just try to convince me that I’m being an idiot and that I don’t need to handle anything by myself because I’ve got him. And I want that to be true so badly that, knowing me and my total lack of willpower, I’ll cave.

I can’t cave.

When I finally force myself to go back downstairs, I find him sitting at the dining table with his laptop and what is probably his fifth cup of coffee. He looks up at me and smiles, but just like before, it’s not genuine. Not that I expect or deserve a genuine smile from him right now.

“How was your run?”

“Shit.” I chuckle softly, avoiding his eyes even though I’m not lying. The run part of my morning excursion, all one minute of it, was shit. “How was your shower?”

“Would’ve been better if I’d had company.” I can’t think of anything honest to say to that, so I just offer him what I hope looks like an apologetic smile. “I made you breakfast, but you might wanna reheat it.”

Of course he made me breakfast. Because he’s kind, and considerate, and sweet to me even when I’m being a jerk to him. “Thanks. What is it? Strudel?”

“No.” He laughs a little, and I’m finally able to smile for real because his laughter was real. “Just a waffle and some fruit. But I think Viggo has some toaster strudels left if you really had your heart set on it.”
“Toaster strudels aren’t strudels. They’re barely food.”

I turn away from him and make my way into the kitchen, but he stays at the table. Probably because he’s expecting me to get my food and go back in there, so there’s no point in him following me. After briefly considering taking my breakfast out onto the kitchen terrace instead, I give the door one last, longing look before taking a deep breath and heading back into the dining room.

We sit in silence for a while, the only sounds are the scrape of my knife and fork against the plate and the clacking of the keys on his laptop as he types. I kind of love listening to him type. It might sound crazy, but sometimes it totally sounds like it has a rhythm to it or something. I’ve caught myself tapping my foot along to it on several occasions. But this morning is not one of those times. There’s no rhythm, just a lot of stopping and starting. It sounds as awkward as everything else about this moment. I want to ask him what he’s working on, just to break the silence. But I’m afraid that if I initiate conversation, it won’t be long before he changes the topic.

I’m so busy silently debating the pros and cons of talking to him that I don’t realize that he’s stopped typing and is watching me from across the table. When I finally snap out of it and look at him, I feel my heart rate increase immediately. And not in the good way it usually does when I catch him blatantly staring at me. He opens his mouth to speak, and I realize I’m holding my breath…

But before he can get a single word out, the sound of an incoming Skype call interrupts him and he looks down at his laptop screen in surprise.

“Damn. I forgot we had a Skype date with the kids this morning.” He sighs, running a hand through his hair and plastering a wide smile on his face before accepting the call. “Hey, guys!”

“Hi Daddy!” Several cheerful little voices chorus back at him as I get out of my seat and move around to his side of the table. “Happy Thanksgiving!”

“Happy Thanksgiving.” Taylor and I reply in unison, which feels so fucking fake right now. And that fact makes it a struggle to keep my smile from faltering.

“What’ve you guys been up to?” I ask, sitting down beside Taylor. My arm brushes against his when I lean in closer so that the camera on his laptop is pointed at both of us, and I swear I feel him tense up.

“I helped Grandma make a pie!” Asta informs us proudly. “And Penny made pastry leaves for on
“That sounds like it’ll be too pretty to eat.” Taylor replies. “Have someone take a picture of it before anyone eats some, okay?”

“It’s not *that* pretty.” Smiles Penny, rolling her eyes even as a bashful blush spreads across her cheeks. “I made the leaves wrong.”

“You can’t make leaves ‘wrong’, because leaves are all different so there is no ‘wrong’.” I assure her. “I bet it looks awesome.”

“Hey, Tommy!” Viggo interrupts excitedly, practically knocking his sisters out of the way so that he can be in the shot. “Guess what!”

“What?”

“I beat Uncle Zac at ‘Rock N’ Racing’!”

“Hell yeah! I guess all that practice paid off, huh?”

Before anyone can say another word, Taylor’s phone vibrates on the table in front of me, and when I pick it up to hand it to him, I see a text from Zac on the screen that reads ‘I LET him win!’ I’m tempted to reply on Taylor’s behalf, but it’s Thanksgiving, so I pass the phone to him instead.

When the kids first called I was just grateful for the distraction. Their abnormally impeccable timing put a stop to that dreaded conversation before it could even begin. But by the end of the call, I’m grateful for the distraction because it helped us both relax. Taylor stops practically flinching everytime my arm or leg happens to touch his for a moment. In fact his hand is resting on my thigh by the time we wish the kids a happy Thanksgiving one last time and close Skype. Everything feels good, normal… until it’s just us again, and the room is no longer filled with the happy chatter of our children.

There’s nothing to distract us, and it’s like the tension doesn’t so much settle over us as it does crash down on us.
“We should probably get going.” I suggest quietly, getting out of my seat and walking back around to the opposite side of the table to clear away my plate. “We have to pick mom up on the way to Lisa’s, and ten bucks says Lisa is gonna call me just as we turn onto her damn street and ask us to go to the store because she forgot something totally fucking unnecessary, like dinner rolls or marshmallows.”

“Right.”

“I mean, why the fuck do people wanna put marshmallows on sweet potatoes anyway? They’re sweet potatoes, they don’t need added sugar.” I know I’m babbling, but babbling is better than painful silence. “And who needs a roll when there’s already bread in the stuffing, and a dozen other starchy side dishes to gorge yourself on?”

“Tradition, I guess?” He shrugs as he picks up his coffee mug and follows me into the kitchen.

“Tradition is fine as long as you’re not just doing stupid shit because other people did stupid shit for decades before you. People need to think for themselves.”

“Agreed.”

Apparently he doesn’t feel as passionately about this subject as I do. At least, not today. I could just keep ranting about all the dumb crap other people do that I find annoying; I have more than enough material to fill every last second we have to spend alone together in the car between here and Burbank. But we haven’t even made it to the end of Beachwood Drive before I give up on that tactic, because it’s obviously starting to grate on him, and the last thing I need right now is for him to be frustrated at me over more stuff than he already is.

I turn the radio on instead, but that doesn’t magically fix everything the way I hoped it would. We’re only halfway to the freeway when I find myself on the verge of flat out asking him what’s on his mind, even though I know what’s on his mind and I still don’t wanna talk about it. But that’s how fucking awful everything feels and how badly I want it to stop!

“I know this isn’t the best time to bring this up,” He begins apprehensively, taking a deep breath as he works up the nerve to say what he wants to say. “But I can’t just pretend everything’s fine all day when it’s not, so… I think we should talk about last night.”

“I was drunk.” I blurt out thoughtlessly, feeling like a total idiot as soon as I realize what I said. “I
mean… you know how I can get.”

“Tommy-”

“All it takes is one shot too many and I act all clingy and weird.”

“That’s not what happened.” He sighs, clearly disappointed by my reluctance to tell him what’s really going on. “And even if it was, that doesn’t explain how you’ve been acting the last few months.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning… something feels off between us. You keep shutting me out-”

“I don’t!”

Why am I even denying it? We both know I’m lying, so it’s pointless and it’s only gonna make things worse. But I can’t make myself stop.

“You do! You’ve been pulling away from me. And it’s been so gradual that I wasn’t even totally aware of just how bad it’s gotten. Not until last night. It shouldn’t have surprised me when you wanted me to hold you, but it did because you haven’t let me hold you like that for weeks now.”

I shake my head faintly, unable to look him in the eyes. “You’re imagining things.”

“I’m not.” He insists earnestly. “You’re hot and cold with me. One minute you want me, the next it feels like you don’t even want me to touch you. It’s like you’re not… you. You lie to me, or you keep stuff from me-”

“Once!”

Plus those other times. Like right now.
“You’re distant and defensive-”

“Maybe I’m defensive because you’re flat out accusing me of being a fucking liar!” I snap, slumping petulantly in my seat and folding my arms across my chest. Thankfully, he decides to give us both a minute to cool off before saying anything else. And it works. A little.

“I’m not accusing you of being a liar. But you have kept things from me, Tommy, you can’t deny that.”

“It’s not a big deal, okay? Couples go through rough patches, it’s just how it goes. Things aren’t always gonna be amazing between us, we’re not always gonna share everything, or be all over each other every spare second we get… it doesn’t mean something’s wrong. It’ll pass.”

“You’re seriously gonna sit there and tell me that this is just a phase?” He asks incredulously. “That we just need to ignore it and wait for it to go away?”

“I’m saying we shouldn’t make this into something it’s not. We don’t have a problem, Taylor. But if we start acting like we do, maybe we actually will.”

“That makes no sense.”

“Maybe not to you.” I mutter, immediately hating myself for acting like such a fucking brat when he’s done nothing to deserve it. “Look, I’m sorry you feel like something’s off, and I’m sorry I don’t see what you see. But… that’s normal, you know? We’re two separate people. We’re not always gonna feel the same thing at the same time. We’re not always gonna think the same, or agree on stuff, or even need each other. And that’s not a bad thing, that’s healthy.”

“That’s not what this is!” He almost shouts in frustration, his grip on the wheel tightening to the point that I kinda wanna pry his fingers off of it before his knuckles burst through his fucking skin. “This isn’t us, Tommy.”

“Maybe it is, though. It wasn’t before, and it won’t always be. But right now… this is where we are.”
“And you’re okay with that?”

No. But I have to be.

I can’t tell him that, though. He won’t get it. So I settle for staring out of the passenger side window and hoping he won’t press me for an answer. Not that he has the time to, because less than ten seconds later we’re pulling up to my mom’s house.

The car hasn’t even come to a complete stop before I open the door, and I only pause when I notice him reaching to undo his seatbelt. “It’s okay, you can wait here, I’ll get her.”

I don’t think I’ve ever been this happy to be at my mom’s house. I just wish I didn’t have to get back in the car again in five minutes. But on the bright side, once mom’s in the car, Taylor will quit trying to get me to admit that something’s wrong with us. And maybe spending time with my family all afternoon will help him unwind and forget how shitty things feel right now.

And maybe the turkey will snatch the carving knife out of David’s hand at dinner and massacre us all, like the Native Americans shoulda done with the pilgrims.

But for any of that to happen, my mom’s gonna have to actually open the door when I ring the bell. After the first two pushes of the doorbell, and the twenty seconds of patience I show after each one, I start pushing it over and over again in the hopes that it’ll irritate her enough for her to put down her fucking mascara and let me in.

“What’s going on?” Taylor asks from right behind me, startling me so much that I literally jump in surprise.

“She’s not answering the door.”

He frowns, glancing towards the nearest window as though he’s considering looking through it. Or, knowing him, climbing through it. “Maybe Lisa picked her up and forgot to tell you?”

Sounds like something she’d do. “Maybe...”
With a disgruntled sigh, I pull my phone out of the back pocket of my jeans and call my sister, who answers cheerfully after a couple of rings. “I was just about to call you!”

“Why? Because you picked mom up without telling us, and totally wasted our fucking time?”

“Happy Thanksgiving to you, too.” She snorts in amusement. “And no, I didn’t pick mom up, I’ve been up to my elbows in turkey guts all morning. But I need you to run by the store on your way over and pick up some cranberry sauce.”

I knew it! “How the fuck did you forget cranberry sauce?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe my mind was on one of the other one thousand ingredients I needed to buy in order to make dinner for my loving family?”

“Is that supposed to make me feel guilty?”

“Any normal, considerate person? Yes. You? Eh.” She teases me lightly.

“Whatever, we’ll get your stupid cranberry sauce. But if you didn’t pick mom up, then why isn’t she here?”

“Is her car there? I told her not to drive, but maybe she decided to anyway.”

“No, her car’s sitting in the driveway.” I tell her distractedly as I hunt around in the flowerbed by the front door to find the fake rock that contains a spare key. “I’m gonna let myself in and see if there’s any sign of her.”

“Call me back as soon as you know.”

“Sure.”

I don’t even bother saying goodbye before ending the call, my mind is now way too preoccupied with getting into the house and figuring out where the hell my mom is. I can see from the expression
on his face that Taylor’s as concerned as I am about the many possible reasons there are for why she isn’t answering the door, and as soon as we set foot inside the house we head off in different directions to search for her.

“Mom?” I call out as I make my way towards her bedroom, hearing Taylor calling her name from the other side of the house. “Mom, are you home?”

What I see when I open the door stops me in my tracks and almost stops my fucking heart.
It’s one of the most painful sights I’ve ever seen. But as badly as I want to, I can’t look away.

I can’t move, I can’t speak…

There’s a voice in my head telling me to go over to her and see if she’s okay, even though she clearly isn’t. But my feet just won’t cooperate. All I can do is stand here uselessly and stare at her, too paralyzed by fear to do anything else.

I vaguely feel something brush against my arm, and I realize it’s Taylor as he rushes past me and over to her side, like I should have done the second I saw her. He scoops her up off of the floor beside her bed like she weighs nothing at all, lifting her gently back onto the mattress. She may have lost a lot of weight over the last few months because of all of the pointless chemo she’s been put through, but I know she’s not as weightless as he just made her look. He makes everything seem so fucking effortless...

“Tommy!”

I shake my head, trying to clear the fog and focus. “What?”

“Call 911.” He instructs me slowly, like he’s already said it ten times. For all I know, he has.
“Is she...” I begin weakly, finally taking a small step closer. “Is she dead?”

His eyes immediately meet mine, and he shakes his head sympathetically as he takes in the raw fear that I’m sure is written all over my face. “No, but we need to get her to a hospital.”

Numbly, I pull my cell phone out of my pocket and dial 9-1-1. But as soon as someone asks me what my emergency is, my mind goes blank. What am I supposed to tell them? My gaze flits from my mom’s lifeless body on the bed, to the pool of what I’m assuming is vomit on the floor where she was lying a few minutes ago, and suddenly I’m afraid to open my mouth in case I throw up.

“What’s your emergency?” I hear the operator repeat.

“I… we need an ambulance.”

“And what’s your location?”

I should know this. This was my home for years. I’ve spoken and written this address more times than I can count, so why the hell can’t I remember it now?! In a hopeless effort to get my brain to fucking function, I take a deep breath and close my eyes. I will everything I’ve just seen to leave my mind, and I try to focus on the total nothingness that I’m seeing right now. It takes a moment for it to come to me, but I’m finally able to give the operator the address.

“And what’s going on there?”

“It’s my mom…”

“Is she hurt?”

“She’s sick.” I tell her, forcing myself to take another step towards the bed. “S-she has cancer.”

“Tell them she’s burning up.” Taylor interjects quickly. “Beyond burning up.”
“She has a really high fever.”

“Is she conscious?”

“I… I don’t know. Kind of…” I stammer uncertainly as I hear my mom whimper in distress. “She’s not really awake, but she’s not totally unconscious… she’s in pain, I think.” Fuck. I don’t fucking know! All I know right now is that I’m totally fucking up what should be a simple phone call. A five year old could handle making a 9-1-1 call better than this! “She threw up.”

“Just now?”

“No, before we got here. She was on the floor by her bed… like maybe she fell out or something? I don’t know… I don’t know what’s wrong with her.”

“Is she in the bedroom right now?” The operator asks calmly. “Is she still on the floor?”

“No. I mean yes, she’s in the bedroom, but she’s on the bed now.”

“Okay is the front door of the house locked?”

I rack my brain, trying to remember if I even closed it after we come inside. I’m pretty sure I was too busy worrying about my mom to even think about it. “It’s open… I think.”

“The paramedics are on their way, okay? Is there anyone else there with you who can meet them when they arrive?”

“I-I can do it.”

“I don’t want you to leave your mother alone-”

“I’m not.” I assure her, momentarily mesmerized by the way Taylor’s thumb brushes back and forth across the back of her hand while he comforts her.
I can’t really hear what he’s saying. I know he’s talking to her, but pretty much all of my brain power is going into making this phone call intelligible enough to get her the help she needs as quickly as possible, so everything else is just meaningless babble to me.

“Where are you going?” Taylor asks me in confusion when I start to leave the room.

“Someone has to meet the paramedics.”

“I can do it.” He insists, already getting to his feet. “You should be with your mom.”

“No, it’s okay… you’ve got this.”

I make my way dazedly back to the front door, standing at the threshold with my phone in my hand, even though there’s no one there anymore. I can hear the sound of sirens getting closer and closer, and for a minute it’s like I have some kind of flashback to the last time I was waiting on paramedics to come and help someone I love. It was the day of Taylor’s accident. I remember the overwhelming feeling of relief that washed over me as soon as I heard the ambulance approaching... but I don’t feel relieved right now.

I don’t really feel anything.

I think, deep down, I know there’s nothing to be relieved about. When Taylor got hurt, I was sure that, as long as we could get him to a hospital, they would be able to help him. But they won’t be able to help my mom. Not in the long run. They might be able to help her today, but I’m not so sure that they’re going to be able to fix the thing that’s making her sick. The thing that’s killing her.

Once the ambulance pulls up and I see the paramedics climb out and hurry toward me, it’s like everything goes from slow motion to double speed in an instant. There’s constant movement and chatter, and I can’t keep up with it. So I just stand back and let them do their thing. Every so often they direct a question at us while checking her vitals, and each time Taylor is forced to answer because I just stand here and stumble over my words like a total fucking idiot.

Next thing I know, they’ve got my mom loaded into the ambulance, and they’re asking if one of us is going to go with her to the hospital.
“Go.” Taylor gives me a gentle push towards the ambulance. “I’m gonna call Lisa, and get everything cleaned up here. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“O-okay.” I nod slowly as he takes a step back.

Or maybe I take a step back.

Either way, there’s suddenly a little more distance between us, and that realization causes a sudden surge of panic to rise up in my chest. My hand instinctively reaches for his, and he doesn’t hesitate to take it and pull me into one of the tightest hugs he’s ever given me.

“*You’ve* got this.” He murmurs against my ear before pulling away just enough to look me in the eyes so that I can see how sincere he is.

“Just... hurry.”

He kisses me quickly before turning and heading back into the house. Because I asked him to hurry, and that doesn’t involve standing on the sidewalk and watching the ambulance disappear from view. But I already feel more unsteady physically and emotionally without him here.

I hate it.

It’s only a 10 minute drive to the hospital. Less, because there’s hardly any traffic, and being in an ambulance means we don’t have to wait at a single red light (or stick to the speed limit). But the journey feels endless anyway. Sitting here, watching the paramedic tending to my barely conscious mother… it feels endless in the worst way. I don’t want to look at her, it hurts to see her in pain and to not know what the hell is happening to her. But I feel guilty if I don’t look at her. Like I’m letting her down somehow, leaving her alone, even though I’m sitting right here (and she probably has no fucking clue where she is or who’s with her anyway).

There’s nothing but medical speak flying back and forth between the paramedics and the doctors at the emergency room as they unload her from the ambulance. Even if I had any idea what they were talking about, I don’t think I’d be able to process it right now. I follow them blindly, like I’m in some kind of trance, until someone stops me and tells me I can’t go any further. I think this is the part where I’m supposed to protest and demand that they let me be with her.
But instead I just stand back and watch her disappear..

At some point someone comes over and asks me to fill out some paperwork. I manage to summon the brain power to fill out her name, and date of birth, and address… but then I get to the section of the form that asks for her insurance information, and the name of her primary care doctor. I have no fucking clue what to put for either of those things, so I leave them blank. I bet Lisa will be able to fill in all of these blank spaces when she gets here. She probably knows the answer to every question they could throw at her. I’m like the worst possible person to be handling this shit. Because I can’t handle this shit. And I shouldn’t have to! No one should have to sit and fill out fucking paper work while someone they love is suffering..

Just one more thing to add to the list of reasons I hate hospitals.

It’s not too much longer before Lisa arrives. At least, I don’t think it’s been very long. My sense of time is totally screwed up. At first I’m relieved to see her, like a castaway finally seeing a rescue boat after being stranded on an island alone for years. But her comforting hug only lasts for a few seconds, and then she starts bombarding me with anxious questions. I kinda just wanna cover my ears and tell her to shut the fuck up. Instead I take a deep breath and try to give her the answers she needs. I think I say the words “I don’t know” more times over the next five minutes than I have over the last five years. I can see her getting more and more frustrated with me every time I say it, but it’s the goddamn truth!

I don’t know.

I don’t know what happened, or what’s wrong with mom, or when someone is going to come and tell us if she’s okay.

Thankfully, Taylor shows up right around the time Lisa’s voice starts trembling and tears start welling in her eyes. He somehow had the presence of mind to He takes over for me and lets her interrogate him for every detail he can give her. I bet he feels really great about his decision to marry into this family right about now. He just finished cleaning up his mother-in-laws puke, and now he has to deal with his pushy, over-emotional sister-in-law because his husband is a fucking zombie.

Finally we’re approached by a doctor, and we all get out of our seats to hear what she has to tell us. All I want to know is that my mom’s going to be okay. But all I hear coming out of this woman’s mouth is a bunch of uncertainties. Basically, they barely know more than we do, so all she can offer us are theories and assumptions. I guess educated guesses are better than nothing. And realistically it’s the best we could have hoped for. Because without mom being conscious or lucid enough to fill in the giant gaps in the information we gave them, they can’t be one hundred percent sure of anything.
She’s stable, and that’s enough for now.

We’re not allowed to see her until they get her settled in the ICU and hooked up to some fluids to hydrate her, so we relocate to the ICU waiting room until then. Lisa doesn’t even sit down when we get there, she just mumbles something about calling David to let him know what’s going on and then disappears in the direction of the nearest bathroom. Probably so she can cry in private. Or throw up. Or both. I wouldn’t blame her; I kinda wanna do the same thing, but all I feel capable of right now is sitting in this crappy hospital waiting room chair and staring at the wall.

“It’ll be okay.” Taylor tells me, gently placing his hand over mine on the armrest of the chair. I can’t decide if I want to pull my hand out of his grasp, or grab a hold so tightly that it might break a few of his fingers. So I do neither. “The doctor said she’s already doing better.”

“Stable.”

“What?”

“She’s stable. That’s what the doctor said.” I correct him more curtly than I meant to.

“Well… that’s a good start.” He insists as he gives my hand a reassuring squeeze. “She’ll get better now that she’s here and they’re helping her.”

“Yeah, ‘cause they’ve done such a good fucking job of ‘helping’ her up until now.”

“Tommy-”

“Don’t.” I sigh miserably. “I don’t need you to say what I know you’re gonna say, because I’m already painfully fucking aware.”

For a long moment he’s silent, but my whole body is still tense, still waiting for whatever sympathetic, understanding thing he’s going to say next. Instead I feel the weight of his hand suddenly disappear from mine. Even though I wasn’t sure I wanted it there to begin with, now that it’s gone I’m fully aware of just how much I apparently did want it there.
I’m so damn pissed at myself for pushing him away so hard verbally that I managed to push him away physically without moving a muscle. I guess I’ve been getting in a lot of practice in that area lately.

This kind of thing is exactly why I wanted him to back off, so that I could remember how the hell to handle life without him. But what did I do the second something difficult and scary came along? I turned into a useless sack of shit, and he had to take the wheel.

“I don’t know what I would have done if you hadn’t been there.” I admit ashamedly. “I just… stood there.”

“You were in shock. It’s normal to not know what to do when something like this happens.”

“You knew.”

“It’s different. I mean… I love your mom, you know I do, but seeing her like that didn’t impact me in the same way it impacted you. If it had been the other way around, if it had been my mom we found like that, I’m sure I would have felt totally overwhelmed and you would have had to jump in.”

I’m not as sure of that as he is. I can’t picture him too overwhelmed to react to an emergency, not anymore. A few years ago we were a little more equal. We both had moments where we couldn’t handle stuff and we needed to hand the reins over. But this past year it’s like I lost the ability to cope with anything. He always knows what to do in any situation, and when he doesn’t know what to do he figures it out so fucking fast that you’d never guess he’d been clueless for even a second. He jokes about how he thrives on chaos, but it’s not a joke.

“I couldn’t have done what you did back there, even if hadn’t been my mom.”

“That’s not true.” He protests as Lisa quietly returns to the waiting room and takes a seat opposite us.

“What’s not true?” She frowns, her voice still thick with tears even though her cheeks are deceptively dry.

I ignore her question, because I don’t want to have to deal with her reaction when I tell her that I just
stood there and did fuck all while Taylor tended to our barely conscious mother.

“I couldn’t have just swooped in and picked her up off of the floor like you did. You were like a goddamn super hero or something, you should’ve been wearing a fucking cape.”

“Are you pissed at me for helping her?” He asks uncertainly.

“No.”

“You sound like you’re pissed at me.”

“I’m not pissed at you, I’m pissed at me because I didn’t do what you did. I couldn’t have, no matter whose mom it was, or whether you were there or not.”

“I don’t believe that. You can’t know how you’re gonna react in a situation like that until it happens.”

‘Yeah, well, it did happen, and that is how I reacted, so I do know.” I snap at him impatiently, pushing myself out of my seat. “I’m gonna go get some coffee. I assume you want one?”

He slowly gets out of his seat, unable (or unwilling) to meet my eyes. “I can go. You should wait here incase-”

“I can get myself a cup of coffee. I am capable of doing that much.”

_Fuck._

What the fuck is wrong with me? Why can’t I figure out how to keep him at arm’s length without emotionally punching him in the face? It’s like this automatic response that I can’t shut off. He does something to try to support me, or comfort me, or love me, and I take a swing. I may as well have just hit him for real, I know I hurt him just as badly. And he loves me so damn much that he’ll keep coming back for more.
I don’t know that there’s anything I could say or do to make him stop.

Part of me doesn’t want him to stop. I don’t want him to ever stop trying, to give up on me. But at the same time… I sort of wish he would.

I’m so fucked up.

When I eventually drag myself back to the waiting room, trying to juggle three paper cups full of crappy hospital coffee, Taylor is gone. I glance around the room, as though I’m expecting him to be here somewhere, but I’m not really surprised to find that he’s nowhere to be seen. After the way I’ve treated him all day, I wouldn’t blame him if he drove straight to LAX and hopped a plane to Tulsa so he can spend Thanksgiving with people who are more mature than me.

People like Asta.

“He said he had to make some calls.” Lisa informs me as I hand her one of the coffees and retake my seat.

“Okay.”

“I’m pretty sure he just needed a minute to himself.” I nod in acknowledgement, my eyes trained on the lid of the cup in my hands, watching the small tendrils of steam weave their way out. “Are you guys fighting?”

“No.”

“Then why were you treating him like crap before?” She demands accusingly, like I really need her giving me shit right now.

“Stay out of it, Lis.”

“I know all this stuff with mom is stressful and scary, but you can’t take it out on him like that.”
How do I always forgot that ‘stay out of it’ and ‘stick your nose in where it doesn’t belong’ are the same thing to her? “I’m *not* taking it out on him. You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“So tell me.”

“You seriously think I wanna have a heart to heart with you right now. *Here*?”

She shrugs, looking around the almost empty room. “Have you got something better to do?”

Yes. *Nothing*.

“There’s nothing to talk about. Just let it go. I was upset and I snapped at him. I don’t need you telling me that I shouldn’t have done it, because I already know that, and when he comes back I’ll apologize. Happy?”

“Giddy. And he’s coming this way, so now’s your chance.” She tells me as she gets out of her seat and smiles weakly but warmly at Taylor. “I need to use the restroom, but can one of you text me if there’s any news?”

“Sure.”

She gives his arm a quick squeeze of encouragement, and then shoots a stern look my way before leaving us alone. Just me, Taylor, and that giant fucking elephant in the room.

“I got you a coffee.”

“Thanks.” He sits down beside me, but he doesn’t reach for the cup on the table in front of us.

I can’t decide if that means that the situation is really bad or just the coffee

“Look…I’m sorry about before—”
“When?” He asks, and before I can so much as open my mouth, he continues. “When you ripped my head off for offering to get you coffee? Or when you were making me feel guilty for helping your mom? Or when we were fighting in the car? Or when you avoided me all morning? Or last night when we-”

“Okay, I get it! I’m an asshole.”

He takes a breath, clearly trying to keep this conversation from going any further south. “I’m sorry. I know this isn’t the time or place to get into it, and I’m not gonna try, I promise.” Thank fuck. “But…”

“But…?”

“I need you to know that I’m not going anywhere, no matter how much you try to push me away. So please, for both our sakes, stop pushing.”

“Taylor-”

“I love you.”

“I know that.” I sigh sadly, unable to look into those big, blue eyes of his.

I love those eyes. I’ve always loved looking into them, losing minutes, hours... I love the color. No one else I’ve ever met has the same color eyes as him. Taylor blue. And I love how clearly I can see his true emotions in them, no matter what he says he’s feeling, or what expression he’s wearing. His eyes are always honest.

But lately it feels too dangerous to look into them. I’m so afraid of what I might see, or what he might see... of what it might do to me.

“I’m here, Tommy. I’m here, and I can be whatever you need me to be. I’ll be your shoulder to cry on, I’ll be your tension release, I’ll even be your punching bag. But I won’t be a bystander, you can’t ask me to be. I can’t just sit on the sidelines and not be involved, not try to help. It’s not who I am and it’s not the kind of partner I want to be.”
“What if that’s the kind of partner I need you to be?” I mumble quietly, immediately wishing I’d never said a word.

“I…” He shakes his head slowly in confusion. “What does that mean?”

“Nothing. Forget I said anything.”

“Are you seriously telling me you want me to stay out of all this? To let you handle it alone?”

I squeeze my eyes shut for a moment, willing this whole conversation to be over, or for it to have never started. I know it’s pointless. No matter how badly I might want this moment, and this hospital, and this situation, and the whole fucking world to disappear so that I don’t have to deal with it all anymore, closing my eyes doesn’t make it happen.

It just makes it easier to pretend, even if it’s only for a second.

When I open them again, they immediately seek out his before I can think to stop them. The overwhelming empathy and unconditional love I find staring back at me is nothing new, it’s always there. But the hurt and rejection isn’t. It’s there because of me, and that fact breaks me. Just a little. Just enough.

My hand finds his, entwining our fingers and holding on tightly.

I’m sure it’s not the answer he wants. Hell, it’s not even an answer at all. But I don’t have an answer to give him. I don’t know anything for sure. Nothing in my life feels certain anymore.

Not even him.
Chapter 65

He didn’t say no.

Maybe I should take it as a good sign that he didn’t say yes, either. But I’m finding it hard to see the good in the fact that, when asked flat out if he wants my love and support during one of the most painful experiences of his life, my husband had nothing to say.

And yet, his inability to answer me says plenty all on its own.

I’ve been sitting here in this waiting room all afternoon with nothing to do and nothing to distract me from all of these thoughts and fears that won’t stop plaguing me. Tommy and Lisa have been in and out of Dia’s room as often as the nurses will allow, but only two people are allowed in her room at a time. They’ve both offered me the opportunity to take their spot, but I can tell neither of them really wants to give up one of the limited chances they have to be with her.

The doctors still aren’t one hundred percent sure what’s wrong. They said it was an infection, and that they were running tests. That was over six hours ago, and we haven’t heard anything from them since. Not that I know how long it takes to get the results of the tests, or even what tests they ran, but I guess I expected we’d have an answer by now. And it’s pretty obvious that Tommy and Lisa are getting closer and closer to grabbing the next person who walks by us wearing a doctor’s coat, whether they have anything to do with Dia’s care or not, and shaking them until they get some information out of them.
I feel completely useless, to be honest. Tommy has refused every offer I’ve made to get him something to eat or drink, and that’s pretty much the only thing I can think of to do for him right now. Besides holding his hand, which I’m not even sure he wants me to do. He seemed to earlier, when he couldn’t tell me whether or not he even wanted me around for all of this. But then the nurse came over to tell us that we could see Dia... and he let go. He hasn’t touched me again since. He’s barely spoken to me.

It would be easy enough to tell myself that it’s not about me, that everything that’s happened today is weighing on his mind and he’s... elsewhere. He’s just worried about his mom.

But even though I know that’s true, I also know it’s true that some of it is about me. About us. I’ve spent too much time over the last few months living in denial, trying to chalk his behavior towards me up to him being stressed out about Dia’s health and scared of what’s to come. I’ve told myself that it’ll pass eventually, it will get better. But so far it’s only getting worse.

I can see it so clearly now. Now that I’m looking right at it rather than looking the other way. You’d think that once I’d noticed things unraveling, I would be able to put a stop to it, to gather it all back in and put it all back together. But it’s unraveling even faster now. I feel like I’m desperately grasping at the frayed edges of our relationship, trying to hold it all together and keep the damage to a minimum.

And somehow all I seem to be doing is more damage.

Earlier in the afternoon, I tried texting with Zac to take my mind off of everything. But despite my efforts to keep the topics light and inconsequential, I apparently “sounded” down to him. I told him I couldn’t sound anything in a text message because it was silent, but he insisted he could hear it in my “texting tone”. I didn’t have the mental energy to debate the matter with him, and I was pretty sure he would win anyway. So I ended up spilling my guts to him. Several times I came close to closing our conversation and calling him instead, because typing it all out was draining. But I knew I couldn’t openly discuss my relationship issues in the middle of an ICU, especially not when there was always the risk that Tommy might hear me.

Unfortunately, it was all for nothing. Zac had no idea what to tell me, besides the fact that he was sorry and that I should “hang in there”. He reminded me of the issues he’d had with Kate after Natalie’s death and my move to L.A., and how bad things had gotten between them, but how good they are again now. I knew he was right. He’d held on by his fingertips, even when it looked hopeless and hurt like hell, and it had been worth it in the end.

I hope that Tommy and I never find ourselves as close to the edge as they were back then. Back then, I couldn’t have imagined that we ever would, that we would even come close. Hell, six months ago I couldn’t have imagined it. I got comfortable and complacent. I wasn’t prepared for this. Life was good, we were good…
I wish I could pinpoint the *exact* moment when that began to change, even though I know I can’t go back and do anything any differently now. It’s done. And I’m *so* angry at myself for letting this happen to us. I used to be so fiercely protective of what we have, so afraid of losing it. But after we’d been together for a while, and everything was going so well for us, I let my guard down. I let myself believe that we could survive anything, because it seemed like we already had. I didn’t need to be on constant guard, ready to fight for us at every turn in whatever way was necessary. We were safe.

I should’ve known better. I should have been ready for this somehow. I should have started fighting months ago, before it got this close.

Before it started to tear us apart.

“Are you going home?” I hear Lisa ask, her voice pulling me out of my staring match with the empty chair opposite me. But when I look up I see that she’s talking to Tommy, not me.

“I guess.” He sighs as he glances back in the direction of Dia’s room. “I feel like shit for just leaving.”

“They basically kicked us out for the night.” She reminds him sympathetically. “They’re not gonna let us see her again until tomorrow morning, and even if they did, she’s barely been conscious all afternoon anyway.”

“I know… I just feel like I should stay, you know? In case something happens.”

She smiles tiredly, pulling him into a tight hug that he half-heartedly returns. “Nothing is going to happen. She’s stable, she’s been improving all day. Slowly, but still… it’s progress.” He nods against her shoulder before they let each other go, and then Lisa turns to me. “Thank you for being here.”

“Oh course.” I tell her as I quickly get out of my seat and step into the hug she’s offering me.

“I feel so bad that you had to sit out here alone so much of the time.”

My eyes meet Tommy’s over her shoulder, but he almost immediately looks down at the small stack of magazines on the table next to us. “Don’t worry about it. I’d do it again in a heartbeat.”
“Hopefully you won’t have to.” She gives me a grateful squeeze before letting me go and picking her coat up off of a nearby chair. “I’ll see you tomorrow, I guess.”

“‘Night.” Tommy replies quietly as we watch her walk away, before adding in a mumble, “Happy fucking Thanksgiving.”

“Speaking of Thanksgiving… do you wanna grab something for dinner on the way home?” I ask hopefully, handing him his jacket and falling into step beside him on our way out of the ICU. “I’m not sure what’ll be open, but we could probably find something-”

“I just wanna go home.” He sighs. “I know I basically just sat on my ass all day, but I’m exhausted.”

“I know what you mean. Endless sitting shouldn’t be as tiring as it is.” He doesn’t respond, and I don’t really blame him. It was a pathetic attempt at making conversation, and it deserved to die a swift and merciless death.

But I don’t know what else to say to him. Nothing feels appropriate right now. Small talk is a waste of breath, and anything more serious than that would be too much after the day we’ve just had. I wish I didn’t have to put it off for another second, let alone another night, but I know that trying to get him to have a discussion about anything meaningful when he’s this tired is pointless.

The drive home is filled with more silence. I’m too wary of doing anything to piss him off, so I don’t attempt to turn the radio on in case he doesn’t want it on. Then again, he probably wouldn’t even be aware of it unless I turned the volume up full blast.

He’s sitting right beside me, but he’s not here.

It takes him a moment to realize we’re home once I’ve pulled the car into the driveway and turned off the engine. I watch him stare out of the windshield, unmoving, unblinking, and I struggle to figure out how to gently bring him back to the here and now. I know he doesn’t want to be in the here and now, and dragging him back to it seems cruel. But so does leaving him sitting in the passenger seat all night while I go upstairs and sleep in our insanely comfortable bed.

“We’re home.” I tell him quietly.
A frown slowly creases his brow as he finally blinks and takes in what’s right in front of him. “Oh.”

He remains still for a few seconds longer, and then without another word he unbuckles his seat belt and opens his door. I guess that would be my cue to do the same. I follow him over to the front door and unlock it to let us inside, and he doesn’t even wait for me to turn a light on, he just makes a beeline for the kitchen. The sound of bottles clinking together lightly in the refrigerator door is the first thing I hear when I enter the room (and turn the light on).

“Where’s all the beer?”

“Everyone drank it last night.” I remind him, already internally bracing for the frustrated explosion I’m sure is coming. “There’s some wine left...”

He walks across the room towards the half empty bottle of Merlot sitting on the counter top, pulling the rubber stopper from the top and tossing it carelessly aside before walking by me. I’m about to head after him, not to join him, because he obviously doesn’t want company, but just to find out where he’s going so that I’m not left wondering. But I’ve only taken a couple of steps when I feel my phone vibrate with a text. It’s from Alex, and it simply asks if I’m busy.

I exhale a breath of bitter laughter as I stare down at the words. Am I busy? I don’t know. Does following my broken husband around our house at a distance count as being busy? I spend so long standing in the middle of the dining room, trying to decide what to say, that I don’t type a single word before a second text comes through.

_can I come over?

I honestly can’t remember the last time he asked if he could come over rather than showing up unannounced or basically inviting himself. A feeling of uncertainty and concern settles over me, and I’m about to ask him what’s wrong when I remember the ring he showed me last night. I bet that’s it! He proposed, and he doesn’t wanna tell me in a text. It’s probably not the best time to invite someone over, but I doubt Tommy’s going to come out of whatever dark corner he’s hiding in, and he won’t let me join him there.

I could really use some good company bearing good news right now…

Sure! See you soon.
Knowing it will probably take him at least twenty minutes or so to get here, I take the opportunity to
rummage around in the fridge for some leftovers from last night’s dinner. I haven’t eaten since
breakfast, and now that the drama of the day has subsided somewhat, I’m starting to realize just how
hungry I actually am. But I’ve barely had the chance to put my plate in the microwave when the
doorbell rings.

“That was fast!” I chuckle in surprise as I open the front door and let Alex into the house. “Where
the hell did you text me from? Hollywood Boulevard?”

“Pretty much.”

“So when you said ‘can I come over’, what you meant was ‘I’m almost at your front door’?”

“Pretty much.”

“I’m kinda surprised you even asked first.”

“Yeah, well…” He shrugs. “I was on my way over when I remembered that it’s Thanksgiving, so I
figured you might have something going on. I didn’t wanna intrude.”

“You’re not… now. But if you’d texted me an hour ago, I wouldn’t have even been here. We’ve
been at the hospital all day.”

He frowns worriedly. “Tommy’s mom?”

“She’s got some kind of infection.” I explain as we head for the kitchen together. “She was in pretty
bad shape when we found her, but she was doing a little better by the end of the day.”

“How’s Tommy?” He asks, looking around him expectantly. “Is he still at the hospital?”

“No. I actually don’t know where he is.”

“He’s not here?”
“Oh, no, he’s here.” I sigh, retrieving my sad looking dinner from the microwave. It looked so much more appetizing last night. “He’s holed up somewhere with half a bottle of red.”

“Are you sure I should be here? If you wanna be with him-”

“I do. But he doesn’t want to be with me right now, so…”

“Why the hell wouldn’t he wanna be with you?” He asks incredulously. “Especially now?”

“I wish I knew.”

Grabbing a couple of forks, I lead him into the dining room and take a seat at the table. That’s when I notice the bottle in his hand, and his gaze falls to it as soon as he realizes what it is I’m looking at.

“Oh, right.” He places it on the table in front of us before sitting down beside me. “Champagne?”

“Fancy.”

His expression remains stoic as he peels away the foil from around the cork. I don’t know how he does it. I’m awful at keeping big, life altering news to myself, I can’t keep a straight face and play it cool for more than a minute. But he can always make a dramatic announcement even more dramatic by pretending it’s not a big deal at all. Like when he told me that he and Z slept together after he told her that he loved her and she’d said they should just be friends. He just dropped that little tidbit into the conversation like it was nothing, and it almost made me fall out of my damn wheelchair!

“Are we celebrating anything in particular?” I inquire playfully, already knowing full well what he’s here to tell me.

“Yup.” He pops the cork, and I instinctively recoil a little, even though it came nowhere near hitting me. “My return to the meat market.”

“Congratulations…” My enthusiastic response to his announcement comes to an abrupt halt when his
words actually register. I pause, giving him the opportunity to drop his act. I wait for that insanely large grin of his, and his boisterous laughter. But that feeling of uncertainty and concern descends on me all over again when neither comes. “What’re you talking about?”

“I’m old, free and single.” He announces bluntly, tipping the bottle to his lips and taking a long sip before holding out to me.

But all I can seem to do right now is sit here with my mouth open and wonder what the fuck is going on! “I don’t understand…”

“She said no.” He informs me, like it’s that simple and I should have expected this. “Hence, the unopened bottle of champagne.”

“I… I don’t…”

“Mind if I crash on your couch tonight?”

“Alex-”

“I get it if it’s not a good time. I can go to a hotel or something.”

“You’re not going anywhere.” I practically order him, pushing my plate of untouched food aside and shifting my chair a little closer to his. “Are you…” I take a deep breath, buying myself a few seconds to come up with a way to end the question that isn’t completely stupid and pointless. But there isn’t one. “Is there anything I can do?”

Once again, he offers me the bottle of champagne, and I obediently take it and tip it against my lips. It’s so strange to be drinking something I’ve always associated with happy occasions while everything feels so shitty. It’s almost like the little bubbles of joy are mocking us as they dance across our tongues. We wordlessly pass the bottle back and forth or a while, and eventually I summon the courage to break the quiet.

“Do you wanna talk about it?”

He shakes his head faintly, taking another sip. “Not yet.”
“Okay.”

“Sorry.”

“Why are you apologizing?” I ask him in bewilderment. “You have nothing to be sorry for.”

“You mean besides showing up here after you’ve already had a shit day, giving you even more bad news, and then refusing to elaborate?”

“You’re welcome here anytime, no matter what kind of day I’ve had. And as for not filling me in on all the details… that’s your right.”

He shakes his head sadly, picking at the edge of the label on the bottle of champagne. “I just… can’t believe it happened, you know? It’s like I don’t totally understand it, so I don’t know how to explain it to anyone else.”

“That makes sense.”

“Nothing makes sense right now.” He mumbles despondently as I reach out and pull his hand away from the bottle, holding it tightly in the hopes of offering him some semblance of comfort. “Don’t suppose you’ve got anything stronger than a two hundred dollar bottle of Dom?”

“I’m pretty sure we drank every last drop of liquor in the house last night. All we had left was half a bottle of wine, and Tommy’s probably polished that off already.”

“Last night…” The smallest hint of a smile graces his lips for a split second, but there’s nothing even remotely cheerful about it. “It feels like months ago already.”

“Yeah…”

“I never saw this coming, Tay. How did I not see this coming?”
I don’t know.

I’m still trying to figure out how the hell my relationship wound up in the mess it’s currently in. I can’t even begin to help him understand what happened to his.

The rest of the evening passes in silence, for the most part. But it’s not the same tense silence as the one that has been haunting Tommy and me all day. It’s undeniably somber, but it’s still comfortable. I don’t feel the need to say anything, but I’m also not afraid that if I do it will be the wrong thing and result in a pointless fight.

It’s just after midnight when I leave Alex alone on the couch with a blanket and the TV remote. It strikes me that it’s the second time this month that a friend has had to crash on our couch because they didn’t want to go home and deal with their significant other. I can’t help thinking about Tommy’s reaction to Holden and Ryan’s problems, how hard he seemed to take it. I don’t even want to tell him about Alex and Z, I feel like it would be tantamount to pulling another rug out from under him when he’s still in the process of getting back on his feet after this morning.

It seems like all that’s happened this past year has been an endless string of rugs being pulled out from under him. And at least before he would take my hand and let me help him get back up again. But now he’s refusing it, insisting on doing it alone even though I’m right here.

I can’t go to bed without at least taking a quick look around the house to find out where he is and what he’s doing. But as it turns out, I don’t need to search for him at all because I find him in the first place I look. He’s in the movie room, watching some John Wayne film with the volume barely above mute. I doubt he’s actually watching it, he’s seen it enough times to know every word by heart. He probably only put it on because he needed something familiar, something dependable that couldn’t disappoint him.

I wish I could be that something for him. I know I used to be.

Even though I had planned on asking him if he wants to come to bed, I can’t bring myself to disturb him. I’m not even sure if he’s still awake, all I can see from the doorway is the top of his head. Another plan I can’t bring myself to go through with is the one where I go upstairs to our bed alone. But since I still don’t want to burst his protective little bubble, that really only leaves me with one option.

I slip into the room and close the door behind me as slowly and quietly as I possibly can, casting furtive glances his way every few seconds to see if he’s aware of my presence. If he is, he doesn’t show any sign of it. With step one of my mission accomplished, I embark on step two: getting myself
into a recliner undetected. Since I’m a total klutz, the odds of me tripping over absolutely nothing are pretty high. But once again I somehow manage to achieve my goal without bringing any attention to myself. I carefully settle myself into the chair, shifting inch by inch to get comfortable, and hoping against all odds that the chair doesn’t make a sound and give me away. It’s absolutely ridiculous, and I’m fully aware of that fact. But it’s also necessary. He won’t let me be here for him, but he can’t stop me if he doesn’t even know I’m trying.

And if the closest I can get to being here for him in this particular situation is sitting ten feet away from him and staring at the back of his head all night, so be it.

When I wake up the next morning with a sore neck and stiff back, it takes me a moment to remember where I am. It’s the second morning in a row that I’ve woken up somewhere other than my own bed. It’s also the second morning in a row that I’ve woken up alone.

I push myself out of the recliner, taking a moment to stretch in a futile effort to release some of the tension and tightness in my body. I’m on my way up the stairs when I suddenly see Tommy appear at the top. He pauses for a moment when he sees me, but then I see him take a deep breath and continue his descent.

“Hey.” I try to smile as we meet halfway, willing him to do the same.

And he does. Barely. “Hey.”

“You’re up early.”

“I wanted to get back to the hospital.” He shrugs. “Why’d you sleep in the movie room last night?”

“Because you did.” I tell him simply, truthfully, because I’m tired of all the pretense. “I didn’t want you to be alone.”

He nods, averting his gaze to the steps at this feet to avoid having to look me in the eyes. Not that he was doing so to begin with. I don’t know why, but I was expecting some kind of response to what I said, even if it was just him calling me an idiot. But apparently that silent nod of acknowledgement is all I’m getting.

I follow him as he continues down the stairs, and as we’re passing through the dining room on our
way to the kitchen, he glances toward the family room and does a double take at the sight of Alex sleeping on the couch. He comes to such an abrupt stop that I almost walk right into him, and when he turns to face me again there’s barely a few inches between his body and mine.

He frowns in confusion, gesturing to Alex’s sleeping form. “Where the hell did he come from?”

“He came over last night after…” After you walked out on me. “After we got home.”

“And he slept on our couch because…?”

I don’t want to tell him. I am legitimately afraid of telling him. But I don’t know what other choice I have, because I don’t want to lie to him either. And even if I did lie or somehow manage to put off telling him now, he’s going to find out eventually.

“He… uh… he just…” I sigh tiredly, my shoulders dropping in defeat. “He and Z broke up.”

His head automatically turns in Alex’s direction before almost immediately whipping back around to look at me. His eyes search mine, and I can see the uncertainty, the shock, and the sadness mingle in them. For a moment, he allows me a glimpse into what he’s feeling… and then it’s gone.

“How’d he manage to fuck that up?” He mutters as he turns away from me and heads back in the direction we just came from.

“He didn’t fuck anything up. He asked her to marry him and she said no.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know.” I shrug helplessly. “He didn’t give me the details, he wasn’t in a chatty mood.”

“Doesn’t matter.” He snatches his car keys out of the bowl on the end table beside the front door. “Wouldn’t have lasted anyway.”

“Tommy!”
“I’ve gotta get to the hospital.”

“Well… just let me get changed and I’ll come with you.”

He shakes his head as he irritably yanks the door open. “I’m already later than I wanted to be.”

“I’ll only be a minute-”

“You don’t need to come with me!” He snaps before seeming to realize how absolutely shitty what he just said must have sounded to me. “Right now, I mean. You have a car, you can come by after you’ve had a chance to shower and have some breakfast or whatever. Besides, you’ve got Alex to deal with.”

He doesn’t give me a chance to argue, not that I can think of anything to say anyway. He pulls the door closed on his way out, shooting me one last look that I want to believe is one of regret.

But that’s probably just wishful thinking on my part.
After pointlessly staring at the front door for a while, like I seriously expected Tommy to come back through it and apologize, I made my way into the kitchen and started making breakfast. Only I didn’t really realize I was doing it. I was on auto-pilot, my body was doing one thing and my mind was entirely focused on another. I didn’t snap out of my daze until Alex wandered into the room, and by that point I’d apparently made enough waffles to feed a small country.

“What’s with all the waffles?” He frowns drowsily, still rubbing his tired eyes as he tries to wake himself up. “Expecting company?”

“No…” I blink at the stack of waffles in confusion for a moment before turning off the waffle iron. “I guess I got a little carried away.”

“You okay?”

“Yeah, I just… I do this sometimes.”

“Make a lot of breakfast food for no apparent reason?” He teases, though the question is tinged with a note of concern.

“Space out and cook a bunch of food without really thinking about it. I think it might be some kind
of coping mechanism or something, I’m just… not sure it actually helps me cope with anything.”

“Huh.”

“Hungry?”

He smiles faintly as I push the plate full of waffles towards him, and I can tell from the way he hesitates before taking one that he doesn’t really feel like eating anything. But before I can tell him that he doesn’t have to eat them just because I made them, he takes a bite.

“Damn, these are good.” He exclaims through a mouthful. “I wasn’t all that hungry a minute ago, but…” Without bothering to finish his sentence, he takes another bite. “Syrup?”

“How’d you sleep?” I ask as I retrieve a bottle of maple syrup from the fridge and place it in front of him.

“Okay once I actually got to sleep. You?”

“Same.”

“Z texted me right after you went to bed.” He sighs quietly, taking a break from devouring his breakfast.

“Yeah?” I won’t deny that I’m curious to know what she had to say, but I also don’t want to pry. “Are you okay?”

He shrugs one shoulder, picking at what’s left of the waffle he’s still holding. “She wanted to know where I was and if I was alright. And to let me know that she couldn’t get anyone to help her move her stuff out until tomorrow.”

“Oh.”

“She said she’s gonna go and stay with a friend tonight so I don’t have to stay here until she’s gone.”
It’s still so surreal. Less than forty-eight hours ago they were sitting out on our patio, laughing and drinking and having a great time together. And Alex was showing me a diamond ring and telling me how perfect she was for him… and now she’s texting him about moving out and offering to stay with a friend so he won’t have to see her if he wants to go home.

How does something like this even happen?

“Is Tommy still asleep?” He asks, breaking me out of my thoughts and leaving me momentarily unable to even comprehend the question. “Tay?”

“No, he left already.

“You didn’t stay here because of me, did you?”

“No, I stayed here because I was told to.”

He doesn’t bother asking me if I’m serious; I think it’s pretty obvious from my tone and my demeanor that I’m not kidding. I wish I was. I wish I could’ve told him that yes, he was the only reason I stayed behind, and as soon as he’s ready to leave I’ll be headed right back to Tommy’s side.

Where I’m supposed to be.

“I guess I should probably head home.” Alex mumbles resignedly. “I can’t hide out here forever.”

“Yeah…”

I watch as he grabs another waffle for the road and turns to leave the room. And suddenly I hear myself call out to him. He stops in his tracks and turns to look at me curiously.

“Want some company?”
I'm sure Tommy doesn’t want me to be at the hospital with him. And I’m sure I don’t want to stay here alone. God knows how much food I might end up making...

“Just give me like ten minutes to take a shower and change?”

He nods gratefully, taking a seat at the dining table to finish his breakfast while I hurry upstairs to get ready. I wish I could say that I feel a little better now, but if anything I think I feel worse. I want to be glad that I’m not going to end up spending all day sitting around the house by myself, that I’ll be spending it with someone who needs my support right now and isn’t opposed to accepting it when it’s offered.

But Alex’s easy acceptance of my support only serves to make Tommy’s rejection of it that much more hurtful and harder to understand.

On the drive over to Alex’s place, I text Tommy to let him know what my plans are, but to also let him know that if at any point he wants me to come to the hospital, I will. I can see that he read the message almost as soon as he received it, but it takes a few minutes for him to reply. Or rather, for that little bubble to appear on the screen to let me know that he’s typing. It pops up, then disappears, and then pops up again. Over and over for at least five minutes. And yes, I watch every last second of that indecisiveness like a total loser, waiting to see what it is that he’s apparently having so much trouble putting into words.

So when a thumbs up emoji eventually pops up on the screen, and nothing else, I’m more than a little disappointed. In fact, I’m pretty fucking irritated, and I petulantly toss my phone over my shoulder and onto the back seat of Alex’s car.

“What the fuck?” Alex chuckles uncertainly, glancing from me to the back seat before turning his attention back to the traffic on Santa Monica Boulevard. “What was that about?”

“Nothing.”

“Tay-”

“No, I’m serious. I texted Tommy and told him to let me know if he needs me, and he sent me a
fucking thumbs up emoji. Which is as good as saying nothing, in my opinion. So I’m done. Twenty bucks says I won’t hear from him again for the rest of the day, and I refuse to spend another minute staring at that screen, willing him to tell me that he wants me there with him. It’s pretty damn obvious that he doesn’t.”

Alex doesn’t respond, because there’s not a whole lot he can say. He could try to reassure me that Tommy does need me, and that he’s just being an asshole because he’s hurting. But I think he knows that I’ve reached a point where I’m no longer capable of believing that. It sounds like a lie, an excuse, and I don’t want to hear it.

He pulls the car over at the curb outside his house, and the two of us silently get out of our seats and make our way to the door. He fumbles with his keys for a moment, and I get the feeling that he’s nervous that Z will be here, even though she told him she wouldn’t be.

Luckily, it’s a non-issue. The house is quiet as we step over the threshold, but Alex continues to glance around him anxiously anyway. I can’t tell if he’s nervous because he’s worried that she will be, or because he wants her to be. Maybe it’s both. I’m sure some part of him would give anything to see her right now, to have her tell him how sorry she is and how much she loves him.

But we both know that, even if she were here, that wouldn’t happen.

I follow him back to the kitchen, and he dejectedly offers to make us some coffee. It hadn’t even occurred to me until now that I haven’t had any coffee yet today. I can’t remember the last time I survived this much of a day without a single drop of caffeine! I didn’t even know that I could function uncaffeinated anymore. But when he turns to the refrigerator to get some milk, he stops. I take a step closer, trying to figure out what it is that’s caught his eye and left him frozen in place, and when I see the strip of photobooth pictures of him and Z hanging from the refrigerator door, I have my answer.

They look so happy and in love. She’s laughing in every single one of them, and he can’t take his eyes off of her.

“Wanna do some day drinking?” I offer semi-seriously, and I can’t help but smile when I hear him exhale a relieved breath of laughter.

“Thought you’d never ask.”
“Come on.” I reach over and turn off the coffee maker for him before nudging him back towards the door. “I know a place.”

I commandeered his car keys without any real protest on his part, and he slumps in the passenger seat beside me as I navigate through the streets of Fairfax until I find a liquor store. When I return to the car a few minutes later and hand him a bottle of tequila, he smiles knowingly, nostalgically. And after a brief stop at a McDonald’s drive-thru for a couple of large sodas, I drive us out to the somewhat secluded spot in Malibu that we always used to come to when we needed to drink our troubles away.

While Alex makes himself comfortable on the hood of the car, I go about pouring out most of our sodas and mixing what’s left with a decent amount of tequila. As I take my place beside him and hand him his cup of tequila and coke, I have a momentary flashback to the last time we came here together. It was one of the worst days of my life. I felt like I’d lost everything and I had no idea where I was supposed to go or what I was supposed to do next. I’d left Natalie for Tommy, and then within twenty-four hours Tommy had left me, claiming that he didn’t want to be with me because he didn’t love me.

“Hey, barkeep, there’s some kind of carbonated brown crap in my tequila.” He informs me disapprovingly. “It’s like you don’t really want me to get drunk or something.”

“Sorry.”

“You okay?” Alex asks, watching me closely as I try to get comfortable against the windshield.

“Yeah… I was just thinking about when we came up here after Tommy and I broke up. It feels like it happened in another lifetime or an alternate reality or something.”

“Tell me about it.” He commiserates sympathetically. “What the hell is going on with you guys, anyway? Are you fighting or something?”

I shake my head faintly, staring up at the sky as I take a sip of my drink and trying to figure out how the hell to answer his question when I haven’t even been able to figure it out for myself. “He’s been pulling away from me. Or pushing me away. Or both… I don’t know. It’s been going on for a while, but I guess I didn’t really realize how bad it had gotten until recently. And then he realized that I’d realized, and everything just started… imploding. I feel like…”
“What?”

“I know it’s crazy, but…” I swallow hard, closing my eyes as I struggle to make myself say out loud one of the most anxiety inducing thoughts I’ve had in years. “I feel like I’m losing him. And I don’t know why.”

“You don’t know why you feel that way, or you don’t know why you’re losing him?”

“I don’t know why I’m losing him. It’s like the more I try to hold on, the harder he fights to pull away. And maybe that means I should let go and let him do whatever he feels he needs to do, with or without me, but… I don’t know how.”

“When did he start pulling away? Did something happen that might have spooked him?”

“Like what?”

“Like… maybe he’s having second thoughts about the babies? Or maybe it’s the fact that it’s going to be babies instead of the one baby you guys planned on?”

“I don’t think that’s it. I mean, yeah, we were both a little freaked out initially, but it wasn’t like he was unhappy about it or anything.”

I search my scattered memories of the past few months, trying to piece them together and put them in order so that I can at least attempt to see when it was that Tommy really started keeping me at arms length. I know it wasn’t when Dia got sick. I remember the night she told us, and I remember him telling me that he needed me. And he let me be there for him when she had surgery, he wanted me to be there. But after that he started keeping things from me, lying to me. And then...

“I guess… there was one night when I came back from tour to be with him after he got some bad news about his mom. He broke down, like… he broke, Alex. I’ve never seen him like that before. And he let me hold him, he let me comfort him. But then he just kinda shut down. He wouldn’t really talk to me, and when he did talk to me it was to ask me to leave.”

“Seriously? Why the fuck would he want you to leave after something like that?”
“He said that me being there made him weak, or made it hard for him to be strong or... something.” I explain miserably, trying and failing to remember his exact words. Which is ridiculous, because I do remember obsessing over them for weeks afterwards.

“Well… maybe that’s it?”

“Maybe what’s it?”

He shrugs uncertainly. “Maybe he just doesn’t wanna be weak, and he thinks that letting you be there for him makes him weak somehow?”

“That’s crazy!”

“I agree, but maybe that’s not how he feels.”

“Well… how am I supposed to make him see that leaning on me sometimes doesn’t mean he’s incapable of doing this alone, it just means that he doesn’t need to?” I question in exasperation, not that I really expect Alex to have any more of an idea of how I’m supposed to handle this than I do myself. It would just be nice if someone did. “I thought we were supposed to be partners. For better or worse, in sickness and in health, we’re supposed to support each other through everything.”

“Yeah, well… I wouldn’t know. I never got that far with anyone.” He mumbles glumly before taking a very long sip from his soda cup.

I am the worst friend ever.

“Shit… Alex, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” He turns his head to look me in the eyes, offering me a small, sad smile. “I didn’t mean to be a snarky little shit about it. I’m just feeling sorry for myself, I guess.”

“Not without good reason.” I assure him gently, wishing there was something I could do to fix this.
I’m not used to seeing him like this. He’s Alex, he doesn’t do sad. He’s incurably optimistic, he lets things roll off his back, and he doesn’t dwell on things he can’t change. I know that sounds impossible, but it’s true!

This isn’t right. This can’t be right.

“Is there any chance that maybe she was just freaked out by the proposal and needed some time to get used to the idea?” I suggest hopefully. “Like when you guys got together a few years ago, and at first she told you she didn’t want to be with you but really she was just scared?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

“Very.” He takes a deep, tired breath. “I lied before.

“What?”

“Last night, when I told you she said no. I lied.” He admits, leaving me even more lost than I was before.

“So… she said yes?”

“No, because I never asked. I never got the chance.” He explains quietly, and I resist the urge to ask one of the many questions that I so desperately want to know the answers to. Mostly because I know how much I hate being bombarded with questions when I’m struggling to deal with something, but also because I’m pretty sure I’ll get all of the answers I want if I give him the chance to tell me in his own time. “I was working my way up to it, giving her this heartfelt speech about how amazing she is and how much better my life has been since we got back together… but before I could actually pop the question, she asked me to stop.”

“Why?” I ask, my words barely louder than the breeze in the trees around us.

“So she could tell me that she wanted to break up.”
“But... why? I’m sorry, I just... I don’t get it. You guys were so happy.”

“I thought so, too.” He mumbles. “Apparently she was just going through the motions. She didn’t want to dump me right before the holidays, she was gonna wait until like... after New Years, I guess. But then I basically got down on one knee and forced her hand.” He shakes his head slowly, gazing up at the wispy white clouds in the sky above us as they lazily drift by. “I’ve been thinking about it ever since it happened, and I feel like such an idiot for not seeing it.”

“Seeing what?”

“The signs.”

“I thought you said there weren’t any.” I frown in confusion.

“I didn’t think there were, but... turns out there were plenty. I just misread them. Like... she’s been spending almost all her time with her friends lately. And I figured it was because we’d been on tour and she’d missed them. But really she was probably just avoiding me. And for months now, every time one of our friends announced they were engaged, or pregnant, or got married, or had a baby, she’d get all... weird. I can’t explain it, it was just a feeling I got from her, you know? And I thought it was because she wanted those things, and she thought I was never gonna grow the fuck up enough to give them to her.” I nod as his glassy eyes meet mine again, the heartache I see in them almost makes me want to cry. “But... now I think it was the opposite. She didn’t want those things, not from me at least. And she was afraid that the longer we stayed together, the higher the risk was that I was gonna do exactly what I ended up doing.”

“So why didn’t she just break up with you months ago?”

“She didn’t wanna fuck up the band. The album had just come out, and we were touring... she didn’t want to dump me in the middle of all of that and make it awkward for everyone. She was gonna wait until we were off the road, but by then it was coming up on the holidays and everything... she just didn’t know how to do it. She didn’t wanna hurt me.”

“I still can’t believe it...”

“Me either.” He chuckles softly, bitterly. “We were together for three fucking years. That’s the longest I’ve ever been with anyone, and it just went up in smoke. I’m thirty-six years old and single.
How fucking pathetic is that?"

“It’s not.” I assure him honestly, giving his arm a gentle squeeze as he takes another drink of tequila to quell his tumultuous emotions. “People start new relationships at every age. There are people who get divorced in their fifties and sixties and start dating again, and people who lose their spouse in their seventies and find love again. Thirty-six is not old, and it’s not a pathetic age to be single.”

“I have gray hairs.” He tells me somewhat pitifully, sticking his lower lip out just incase I wasn’t aware of how hopeless his life is.

“Oh, well in that case I take back everything I just said.” I tease him, finally coaxing a real smile onto his face, no matter how small it may be in comparison to the ones I’m so used to seeing.

“I just… I thought that part of my life was behind me. I thought I was done. I didn’t think I was gonna have to start over again. I don’t want to start over.”

“I know.”

“In my twenties, being single was awesome. I was young, semi-famous thanks to our song being used on that teen sitcom—”

“You mean ‘The O.C.’? Pretty sure it was supposed to be a drama, dude.”

“Seriously? I watched one episode and couldn’t stop laughing. I might have been high at the time, though.” He winks playfully, and I place a hand over my chest as I let my jaw drop in feigned shock.

“You? High? Never!”

“Hard to believe, I know. I mean, back then I was so pure and wholesome and blond… oh, wait, that was you.”

“Ha. Ha.”
“Seriously, though, my early twenties were the shit. Touring constantly, meeting new people, sleeping with whoever caught my eye... present company included.”

“I’m flattered… I think.”

“Now the thought of putting myself out there and trying to meet someone new is fucking exhausting.”

“Maybe that’ll change. Maybe once you’ve had some time to deal with all this, you’ll feel a little more ready to get back out there and you’ll be excited about dating?”

“Maybe. I don’t know…”

For a long while neither of us says anything more. We sip our drinks (or chug them and demand a refill, in his case) and try to let the quiet bring us a little peace. But all it does for me is make the dozens of thoughts and questions racing through my mind even louder. I had hoped that the alcohol in my system might numb me, or make my mind fuzzy enough that none of what’s been going on lately would bother me as much. But apparently I didn’t get my coke to tequila ratio right, because my mind is barely even hazy, let alone fuzzy.

“Do you miss it?” Alex asks, seemingly out of nowhere.

“Miss what?” I frown at him, trying to clear my mind enough to remember what we were talking about. “Dating?”

“No, just… that whole time in our lives. Do you ever miss it?”

“I don’t know. I mean… that was a pretty crap couple of years for me. Between everything with Zac, and Natalie, and Jeff fucking Fenster-”

“But we had fun, right?”

“Yeah, we did.” I acknowledge with a fond smile, thinking back on our brief but undeniably significant time together. “You were pretty much the only thing keeping me sane for a while there.”
He nods proudly, raising his soda cup to meet mine. “All part of the service.”

“It kinda blew my mind that you even wanted to hang out with me, to be honest.”

“Ditto.” He laughs quietly. “I was just some grungy guy with a guitar, playing tiny clubs in L.A., and you were Taylor Hanson.”

“Whatever.” I can’t help but roll my eyes, because he never once appeared even slightly impressed or awed to be in my presence, and I don’t believe he ever actually was. I was the one who ran the risk of coming across like a starstruck groupie. “Do you remember the night we met?”

“Vividly.”

I cringe and shake my head at the memory of how embarrassingly excited I was to meet him after attending my first Phantom Planet show at The Viper Room, and how insanely cool I thought he was.

And to be fair, he really was.

“I was such a little fan boy.”

“Still are.”

“Fuck you.”

“It was cute!” He insists. “You were trying so hard to act like you didn’t think I was some kind of God.”

“Yeah…” I sigh wistfully. “I don’t have that problem anymore.”

“I remember the first time we came up here with a bottle of Cuervo. In fact… didn’t we fool around
for the first time in this very spot?” He asks, craning his neck a little to inspect our surroundings. “We did! It was right here, I remember that rock!”

“Gee, thanks! Good to know where your mind was at while we were making out.”

“Trust me, my mind never wandered for a second when I was with you. You kept me plenty entertained.” He wiggles his eyebrows at me as he pulls the straw in and out of the lid on his cup with ever increasing speed. “Is it just me, or does this totally sound like an asthmatic orgy?”

“And on that note, I’m cutting you off.” I snort in amusement, taking the soda cup out of his hand and emptying what’s left of its contents onto the dirt below us. “Some things never change.”

“We had some good times up here, huh?”

“Oh, if that rock could talk…”

We settle into a comfortable quiet, smiling at one another for a moment as we wordlessly reminisce. When it occurs to me that he seems a little closer than he was a few seconds ago, I wonder if maybe the tequila is finally kicking in and my eyes are playing tricks on me. But as soon as I feel his warm breath on my skin, I instinctively reach out and gently place my hand against his chest to keep him at a safe distance.

“Alex…”

At first he seems confused, like he wasn’t even really aware of what he was doing. I feel awful as I watch his eyes widen in realization, and he pulls back so suddenly that I’m worried he’s going to fall right off of the hood of the car.

“Fuck.”

“It’s okay.”

“I’m sorry.” He sighs miserably, sitting up unsteadily and dropping his head into his hands. “Shit, I’m so sorry.”
“Alex, it’s okay. Nothing happened.”

“Only ‘cause you’re a decent human being.”

“So are you.”

“Last I checked, decent human beings don’t fuck over their best friends.”

“Hey, listen to me. I know you.” I insist earnestly. “And I know that under normal circumstances this never would’ve happened.”

“I shouldn’t have done it. I shouldn’t have even considered doing it.”

“You were under the influence of a volatile cocktail of heartache, nostalgia, and cheap tequila.” He shakes his head sadly, apparently intent on beating himself up no matter what I say. “Let’s just… forget it.”

“Tay-”

“No, I mean it. Nothing happened, so there’s no point making a big deal about it.”

I was hoping my ‘end of discussion’ dad tone would get the message across, but when he finally looks me in the eyes and I see just how awful he feels, I know that there’s nothing I can say to convince him.

“I’m still sorry.”

“I know.”

Maybe putting my arm around his shoulders isn’t the best idea after what just transpired between us, but I don’t care. He’s my best friend and he’s completely crushed right now. I can’t just sit here
beside him and not comfort him. If words aren’t enough to make him see that I’m not going to hold anything against him, I can only hope that maybe actions will be. The last thing either of us needs right now is for there to be any unnecessary distance or tension between us. He just lost Z, and I’m terrified that I’m on the verge of losing Tommy…

I can’t lose our friendship, too.
While Alex and I had been lying on the hood of his car, sipping tequila and coke, I’d been more than a little annoyed by the fact that my mind was no less clear than it had been before we’d arrived. I wanted to get drunk, I wanted to feel good, but it just wasn’t happening. In the end, that turned out to be more of a blessing than a curse. Not only did my clear head keep me from letting Alex’s lips come anywhere near mine, but if I’d been as drunk as Alex, neither of us would have been in any condition to drive home for a couple of hours.

I was sober enough that we were able to leave within an hour of the… incident, and we made it safely back to Hollywood. The drive was silent, and the silence was heavy. I’ll admit that it scared me a little, because it was the first time since we rekindled our friendship five years ago that I’ve felt awkward in his presence. I don’t want him to take what happened between us (or what didn’t happen, to be more accurate) and make it into something more than it needs to be.

But I have a sinking feeling that he’s going to do exactly that.

I suggested that he come in for some coffee once we finally made it back to the house, but he insisted that he was okay to drive and that he should probably just go home. I had to all but literally bite my tongue to keep myself from begging him to stay. If he wanted some time alone to deal with everything, I knew that I needed to give him that. But I did make him promise to call me tomorrow, and to come over while Z moves her stuff out if he doesn’t want to stay and watch her do it.

I almost forgot that my phone was still on the backseat of his car, and I only remembered as he was starting to back out of the driveway. I hadn’t looked at it in hours, and I found myself hesitating
before turning the screen on to check for any text or call notifications. I was equal parts anxious that I might have missed Tommy asking me to come to the hospital, and afraid that he hadn’t attempted to contact me at all since the emoji text that had led to me banishing my phone to the backseat in the first place.

My stupid heart leapt when I saw that I did have a text, but then it sank again as soon as I realized that it wasn’t from him. It was just my mom asking what time we wanted to Skype with the kids today. I wasn’t sure what to tell her, because I have no idea what time he’s going to be home from the hospital, or if he’ll even be in the mood to talk to anyone whenever it is that he does get home.

I briefly contemplated getting in my car and going over to the hospital on the off chance that he actually did want me around but didn’t know how to ask. Then I remembered my talk with Alex a few hours earlier, and what I’d said about letting go.

It still doesn’t feel right, but neither does having him desperately trying to get away from me.

After spending a couple of hours looking for things to do around the house, I went down to the studio and tried working on some new music. But I wasn’t in the mood, and forcing it when it’s not happening naturally never works. Not for me. Sometimes I come up with the best stuff when I feel like shit, it’s like it fuels the songwriting. Other times it makes it impossible, and today was one of those times.

I gave it an hour or so before admitting defeat, and by that point the sun was almost setting. I still hadn’t heard anything from Tommy, so I texted my mom back to ask if the kids were available to Skype for a little while. I didn’t want to miss out on the chance to see them at all today, even if Tommy wasn’t there with me. It was pretty tiring trying to keep up my casual “everything’s fine” act, and I hated lying to them when they asked where he was. I didn’t want to upset them by telling them about Dia, so I couldn’t tell them that he was at the hospital. But I couldn’t come up with any other good reason why he wasn’t there to at least say hello to them.

Luckily, Ezra very quickly picked up on the fact that something was going on, and he jumped right in and started talking about how the rest of their Thanksgiving had gone, and what they’d spent their Black Friday doing. I hate that he’s so aware of the tension. He’s only thirteen, even if he acts older than that most of the time. He shouldn’t have to help me hide this kind of thing from his siblings.

There shouldn’t even be anything for him to hide.

It’s just after six when Duke jumps up from his post by my feet on the kitchen floor and makes a mad dash in the direction of the front door. I turn off the stove and move the marinara sauce I was heating
up off of the burner, and then I make my way towards the foyer. I get there just in time to see Duke scrambling up the stairs behind Tommy, and for a moment I internally debate whether or not I should follow them or wait until Tommy decides to come back downstairs. Except there’s every chance that he won’t come back down at all, and I won’t see him again for the rest of the evening.

So, with a deep breath I head up to our bedroom, silently reminding myself the whole way to not be pushy, and to let him tell me as much or as little about his day as he chooses to.

When I open the door I find him over by the closet, putting on a new shirt. At first I figure he just needed a change of clothes. He’s convinced that the hospital smell lingers, and even though it’s nowhere on my list of favorite smells, I’ve never found it as hard to stomach as he seems to. But the shirt he’s putting on is one of his nicer ones. It’s nothing fancy, but it’s definitely too nice for lazing around at home all night.

“Hey.” I greet him somewhat timidly.

“Hey.”

I watch him quickly check his reflection in the full length mirror, and it’s pretty clear from his expression that he’s not happy with what’s staring back at him. But eventually he heaves a defeated sigh and gives an almost imperceptible shrug.

“What’re you doing?”

“Getting ready.” He replies simply, grabbing a pair of boots from the closet and taking a seat on the end of the bed to put them on.

“For…?”

“Adam’s party.”

It takes me a moment to figure out what he’s talking about, and eventually I vaguely remember him mentioning something about it weeks ago. “I thought you said you didn’t wanna go.”
“Changed my mind.”

I open my mouth to ask if he wants me to go with him, but I somehow manage to stop myself. If he wanted me to go with him, he would have asked me. And it’s not like I even want to go anyway. Especially not while things between us are so... off. I think I’d prefer to feel alone and actually be alone, rather than go to a party with him and feel alone because he’s standing right beside me and pretending I’m not really there.

“How’s your mom?”

“Same.”

“There hasn’t been any improvement since last night?”

He shrugs almost indifferently, but I know he’s not indifferent to anything when it comes to this topic. “Some, I guess.”

“Well... do they know what’s wrong yet?” I ask hopefully.

“She’s got cancer.” How am I supposed to respond to that? “So what did you and Alex do all day?” He asks before I can tell him to stop being snarky and at least try to have a conversation with me.

His swift subject change has me stumbling over my words, trying to keep up.

“I... we... nothing. We just went out to Malibu, drank tequila-”

He finally turns to look at me, and the incredulous frown on his face almost makes me smile. “Why the hell did you go all the way out to fucking Malibu to drink tequila?”

“There’s a place out there, kinda like an overlook, I guess, but no one really seems to know about it. We used to go there when we wanted to get drunk and-”

“Fuck?” He finishes for me bluntly, leaving my head spinning yet again.
“Uh… no, actually.”

“So you guys used to go out to a secluded overlook in Malibu to get shit-faced and… talk?” He asks with a skeptical raise of his eyebrow.

“Among other things.”

“Did ‘other things’ involve him having his hand in your pants?”

I sigh wearily, wishing I could go back and answer his original question differently so that maybe we could avoid this discussion. “Do you really wanna know?”

“Nope.” He turns away from me again before muttering under his breath. “But I already do, so…”

“What’s going on?”

“Nothing.”

“Tommy-”

“Did something happen?” He asks, his demeanor so nonchalant that anyone would think he wouldn’t care either way.

“What’re you talking about?”

“I’m talking about you and Alex, alone with a bottle of tequila and about fifteen years of pent up sexual tension.”

I feel like I stare at him with my mouth hanging open in shock for several minutes rather than seconds. “I… wow. Okay, first of all, there is no pent up anything between me and Alex, let alone sexual tension! That’s insane!”
“Sure.” He replies dismissively, turning and walking out of the room with me hot on his heels.

“And second of all, is that really how little you trust me?”

“It’s not about trust.”

“Then what the hell is it about?”

“Life.” He shrugs, picking his jacket up from the banister at the top of the stairs. “Shit happens. People get drunk and screw people they shouldn’t-”

“Well I didn’t.” I insist honestly as I follow him down the stairs, wishing he’d stop walking away from me and actually look at me while we’re having one of the most ridiculous and yet somehow most important conversations we’ve ever had. “I have never, and I will never cheat on you.”

“Never say never.”

What the actual fuck?! “How the hell can you think like that?”

“I’m just being realistic.” He tells me in that same eerily calm tone.

I, on the other hand, have forgotten how to be calm.

“Because ‘shit happens’?”

“All the time. Every day, things happen that people never thought would happen, that they would have put money on never happening.” He explains, like this concept shouldn’t be so difficult for me to grasp. “I bet your parents never thought you’d come out of the closet at the age of thirty and move to L.A., and I bet you never thought that Natalie would die in childbirth.”

“That’s different-”
“I doubt Alex thought Z’s answer to ‘will you marry me?’ would be ‘Bye Felicia!’, or he never would’ve bothered asking. And I know I never thought I’d end up marrying Taylor Hanson and living in the Hollywood Hills with five step kids and twins on the way. Or that neither of my parents would ever get to hold them. But... here we are.”

Yeah. Here we are.

But how the *fuck* did we get here?

“If that’s *honestly* what you believe, then why did you marry me? If you think it’s just a matter of time before I sleep with someone else-”

“I didn’t say that. I said it happens, because it *does*.” He sighs, clearly tired of my inability to follow his very rational train of thought. “And I married you because I love you and I wanna be with you, but... that doesn’t mean I ever thought you were *always* gonna want to be with me.”

“So when you said ‘til death do us part’, what you really meant to say was, ‘til you change your mind’?” I ask, my heart pounding so fiercely in my chest that I feel like I might throw up.

“No, I meant what I said. But so does pretty much everyone else who says it, and more than half of them end up leaving the person they said it too *long* before either of them kicks it. And most of the people who actually *do* stay married until the day they die probably only managed to do it because one of them got hit by a bus, or had a heart attack, or got cancer and died *way* sooner than either of them ever thought they would.”

“I… I don’t even know what I’m supposed to say to any of this.”

“Then don’t say anything.” He shrugs. Because *clearly* this is not a big deal, and nothing that he’s just said warrants any kind of discussion. “No one’s asking you to.”

“Where is all of this coming from?” I hear myself ask weakly, though it sounds a lot more like a plea than a question. A desperate plea for him to take it all back. “You never used to think this way.”

“Yeah, I did, and you know it.” He sounds almost sad, it’s the only real trace of emotion that I’ve
heard in his voice since he started spouting all of this ‘realistic’ bullshit. I just wish it didn’t feel so much like he was pitying me right now. “You might not like it, but you’ve always known that I don’t see the world the same way you do.”

“I never knew you saw it like this.”

I immediately regret what I’ve said. Or maybe just the way that I said it. I was being one hundred percent honest, but I shouldn’t have allowed so much coldness to seep into my tone. Even if cold is how this entire conversation has left me feeling.

“Sorry to disappoint.”

He doesn’t wait for me to reply before turning and leaving the house. Leaving me. And I couldn’t move to go after him even if I wanted to. It’s like I’m frozen in place, unable to do or say anything. There’s a voice in my head repeatedly reassuring me that this isn’t real, that it wasn’t really him, that he doesn’t really think those things. But it’s not long before that voice is struggling to be heard over a much louder, harsher one. One that’s telling me that he meant every word he said, that he’s not the same guy I married…

That I’ve already lost him.

Eventually I manage to make my legs cooperate just enough for me to back slowly over to the stairs and lower myself onto one of the bottom steps. It’s about as far as I feel capable of going, and it’s where I stay until the headlights shining through the glass in the front door catch my eye. I can’t help but hope that maybe it’s Tommy, that he’s had a chance to think about everything he said, and he’s come home to tell me that it was all total and utter crap.

But that hope is dashed when there’s a knock at the door.

I consider ignoring whoever it is and pretending that nobody’s home. But people rarely drop by our house unannounced unless they’re Alex, which means there’s a decent chance it could be him. I force myself off of the stairs and drag my feet over to the door, and when I pull it open and find Lisa standing on the doorstep, I’m momentarily too surprised to speak.

“Hey.”
“Hey… Tommy didn’t tell me you were coming over.”

“Probably because he had no idea.” She smiles faintly, sheepishly. “Is he here? I need to talk to him, but he’s not answering his phone.”

“He went to some party that Adam’s throwing.”

“He went to a party?” She frowns.

“Yeah, a ‘Black Friday Bacchanal’ or… something. I think he mostly went for the free drinks.”

“Sounds about right.”

We stand in silence for a moment, neither of us really knowing what to say. But eventually I remember the manners my mother spent most of my life beating into me. “Speaking of free drinks, can I get you one? We don’t have any alcohol, but I can make some coffee if you want?”

Another small smile curls her lips, just for a second. “Do you have any tea?”

“Yeah, sure. Come on in.”

I lead her through to the kitchen, coming to an abrupt stop when I notice what was supposed to have been my dinner. The marinara sauce is probably colder now than it was before I put it on the stove, and the spaghetti that was draining in a colander in the sink is now nothing more than a useless, sticky clump of noodles.

I guess it’s a good thing I don’t have much of an appetite.

“Are you hungry?” I ask as I grab a couple of mugs and put the kettle on the stove. “We have some leftovers in the fridge that I could heat up.”

“Thanks, but I don’t really feel like eating.”
“I know what you mean.” I cast a glance at her over my shoulder, offering her a small smile. “I think this might be the first Thanksgiving ever that I haven’t spent stuffing my face all weekend.”

“Yeah, it’s been…” She pauses for a moment, trying to conjure up the perfect word to describe the past couple of days. But there isn’t one.

“So… how’s your mom doing?”

Lisa frowns at me uncertainly for a moment, like she’s not sure if she really understood the question. “You haven’t seen Tommy since he left the hospital?”

“Just for a few minutes before he went out.”

“And he didn’t say anything?”

“Oh, he said plenty, just not about your mom. In fact, he was pretty evasive when it came to that topic.”

“Doesn’t surprise me.”

“Why?” I ask with an increasing sense of dread. “What’s going on?”

“We talked to mom’s oncologist today.” She explains quietly as the kettle begins to boil. “It… wasn’t good news.”

Shit.

I can’t say I’m surprised, but it would be a lie to say that I hadn’t been clinging to some sliver of hope that maybe something would change. That maybe things weren’t going to go the way I think we all knew they were going to go.
“What did he say?”

“Basically that there’s not much they can do at this point, besides trying to manage the symptoms as best they can. Tommy wants a second opinion, only we already got one last month, so really it’d be a third opinion.” She shakes her head sadly as she leans against the kitchen counter beside me and heaves a deep, despondent sigh. “It’s pointless, but he just won’t hear it. It’s like he can’t.”

“Maybe hearing it again from another doctor will force him to face it?” I suggest half-heartedly, even though I’m pretty sure that no medical professional’s opinion is going to make any difference unless they’re saying what he wants to hear.

“Maybe, but I doubt it. He’s spent every spare minute that we’ve been at the hospital for the past two days consulting with Doctor Google.” She rolls her eyes, accepting the mug of tea that I offer her and following me into the family room. “He won’t shut up about clinical trials and alternative treatments…and don’t get me wrong, I know where he’s coming from. I want there to be a miracle cure just as badly as he does. But there isn’t one.” Her voice breaks as she sets her mug down on the coffee table and struggles to rein in her emotions. “There’s just a bunch of long shots that have way more chance of making her feel worse than they do of actually helping her at all. She’s tired. She’s endured months of pain and misery already, with zero sign of improvement. I mean, the only reason she’s in hospital right now is because her immune system was weakened so much by her cancer treatments that it left her more susceptible to infection. I just think…” I watch a tear roll down her cheek as she loses her fight to keep them at bay. And as soon as one escapes, more are quick to follow. “I think she’s had enough. She knows that she doesn’t have much time left, and she doesn’t want to spend it fighting a losing battle, too weak and sick to be with the people she loves.”

I set my own mug down before shifting closer to her on the couch and pulling her into a comforting hug. “I’m so sorry, Lisa.”

“I just wish Tommy could understand.” She sobs against my shoulder, hugging me back so tightly that it almost feels as though she’s clinging to me because she thinks I’m her only hope of getting through to him. That if she can convince me, maybe I’ll be able to convince him.

I’m already convinced, but I honestly don’t think Tommy would be interested in hearing anything I have to say on the matter.

“He thinks that I’m giving up just because I’m not insisting on liver transplants or… flying her to Europe for some unheard of, unproven treatment, but I’m not.”

“I know.”
“If there was any chance that any of it would actually help, she’d do it. But if anything, the past few days have only made it clear that there’s a higher risk of her dying sooner because of the side effects of the treatments. It’s not like I don’t care enough to keep fighting, it’s that I care enough to respect the fact that she wants to be able to live whatever amount of life she has left. She doesn’t want spend it in a hospital bed being poked and prodded and cut open.”

“Did… did the doctor say how long?” I ask apprehensively.

“He can’t be sure, but…” She takes a slow, shaky breath as she lets go of me and wipes her damp cheeks. “He thinks it might only be a few months now.”

“I don’t know what to say…”

It sounds cliche, but it’s true. I’ve already told her how sorry I am, and my being sorry doesn’t fix anything. I could ask if she needs anything or if there’s anything I can do, but it seems so meaningless when I already know that the only thing she needs or wants right now is something no one is capable of providing, least of all me.

“I wish there was something I could do.”

“You’re already doing it.” She assures me with a weary but grateful smile. “You’re here and you care, which is exactly what Tommy needs right now. Even if he doesn’t know that.” He definitely doesn’t know that. “I know he doesn’t make it easy, and I know he can be a total ass sometimes, but… try to be patient with him, okay? I feel like I wasn’t patient enough with him today.”

“You had a lot to deal with, Lisa. No one expects you to know how to deal with your emotions and his, not when it comes to something like this.”

“I know. But if I hadn’t gotten so frustrated with him, maybe he would have handled things better.”

“Same.” I admit guiltily. “I mean, I didn’t know for sure what was going on with him, but I should have. He was acting so…” I sigh tiredly, unable to explain just how surreal and scary it felt to hear the things that he said to me this evening, the way he said them.
To look at him and wonder what the hell is happening to the person I love.

“He’s angry at the world right now.”

I chuckle softly, almost finding it amusing just how much of an understatement that is. “It’s like he’s decided that he’s totally alone in this, that he has to take on everyone and fight everything by himself. I keep trying to make him see that it’s not true, that no one is against him and he doesn’t have to do this alone. But so far I’m not having a whole lot of luck getting through to him. In fact...I think I’m just making it worse.”

“Somehow I doubt that.” She insists with a sympathetic squeeze of my hand. “Like I said, he acts like a total jackass when he’s hurting, I think it’s how he copes. It’s easier for him than just letting himself feel like crap. He lashes out and pushes everyone away, and in the end that makes him feel ten times worse than he would have if he’d just dropped the attitude and let someone in. He knows better, I know he does, but... old habits die hard, I guess.”

“It just… it hadn’t been like that for so long, you know? He wouldn’t always come to me right away when something was bothering him, but he wouldn’t actively shut me out either. I thought he was so far past that, I thought we were.”

“He was.” She murmurs quietly, contemplatively. “Before you guys got together, it was kinda like he was an addict, but instead of turning to drugs to avoid dealing with this problems, he would just turn into a total jerk instead.”

“I thought you were going to say he would turn to alcohol.” I smirk faintly.

“Well… that too. They were his crutches. Which is probably why he never managed to make a relationship work for the first thirty years of his life. It’s impossible to have any kind of lasting, healthy relationship with someone who gets drunk and treats you like shit or pushes you away whenever they’re hurting. He never really cared enough about anyone to try to change, though, not until he met you. And you’re right, he was doing better. But I think something like this is painful enough to send any addict running right back to whatever escape they used to rely on.”

“Yeah, well, right now it feels like I’m watching him OD on it.”

“You probably are.” Great. “But at least you know that he’s capable of dealing with things differently. He just… needs to remember how.”
“Any thoughts on how I can help remind him?”

“Hang in there.” She tells me simply, though the look in her eyes lets me know that she’s aware of how entirely not simple this is. “He can’t keep it up forever.”

Right now, it’s a little hard to believe that.

What she’s saying makes sense, though. What he’s going through is enough to break anyone. It doesn’t matter how much better he’s been at letting me in over the last couple of years. It’s hard to trust anyone when your world is shaken so mercilessly that you feel like you can’t trust anything anymore. And I’m not going to be able to prove to him that I’m someone he can trust by giving up on him.

Lisa doesn’t end up staying very long in the end, she doesn’t even drink her tea. And I’m not surprised. She’s been at the hospital since visiting hours started, and she’s obviously exhausted in every sense of the word. If I were her, I’m not even sure I would’ve been able to find the strength to come over here and try to make peace with my idiot little brother. I would have just gone straight home and crawled into bed. And I get the feeling that’s exactly what she plans on doing.

I kinda want to crawl in bed, too. I desperately want to be unconscious, and to not have to deal with anything else until tomorrow, but I’m not nearly as tired as I need to be in order for that to happen.

After cleaning up my uneaten and entirely unappealing dinner, I try watching TV in hopes of losing myself in some inane show or movie for a couple of hours. But, as always seems to be the case when I need something to keep my mind occupied, there’s nothing on that really catches my attention for more than a few minutes. It’s just after eleven o’clock when I finally give up on using prime time television as a distraction. I’ve resigned myself to the idea of spending the rest of the night lying in bed wide awake, staring at the ceiling and wondering when (or if) Tommy will come home, and whether or not he will come up to bed when (or if) he does.

But just as I’m letting Duke back into the house for the night, my phone starts ringing with a call from Tommy. I’m so stunned to hear from him at all that it takes me a few seconds to stop staring at his face on the screen and actually answer the call.

And when the voice I hear on the other end of the line isn’t the one I’m expecting to hear, or one that I recognize, I’m even more confused than before.
“Who is this?”

“It’s Terrance.” The voice on the other end of the line explains, allowing my heart to resume beating. At least it’s not a cop or an ER doctor calling to let me know that Tommy wrapped his car around a tree or something.

But that still doesn’t explain why one of Tommy’s friends is calling me on his phone. “Hey… what’s up? Is Tommy okay?”

“Uh… yeah, technically.” What the fuck does that mean? “He’s not hurt or anything.”

“But…?”

“I don’t know, man… he’s in pretty bad shape.” He informs me worriedly. “I’ve seen him drunk before, but this is somethin’ else.”

Awesome. “Can I talk to him?”
There’s a pause. It’s not a long one, not really, but it definitely feels like it. “He can’t really talk right now.”

“Why not?”

“He’s totally messed up.”

“Messed up how?”

“Like he’s not makin’ a whole lot of sense, you know?” He admits apologetically. “I think you should probably come get him.”

“Does he want me to come and get him?” I ask skeptically, even though I’m already on my way to the front door.

“I think so.” I don’t. “I mean, I can only understand every few words he says, but about half of them are your name, so I figured…”

And just like that, my stupid heart becomes a giant pile of pudding. “Right.”

“If you can’t come, I can ask around and see if anyone’s goin’ that way. I’d borrow a car and drive him myself, but I’ve had a few—”

“No, it’s fine.” I sigh as I finish pulling on my boots before grabbing my jacket and keys. “I’m on my way.”

“You know where Adam’s place is, right?”

“I think so, but you could text me the address just in case?”

“Sure thing. Sorry for callin’ like this, man.”
“So not your fault.”

I’m not sure it’s anyone’s fault. Not even Tommy’s.

Obviously, he was in control of his actions. No one forced him to drink himself senseless tonight, he chose to do it. But I find it hard to be mad at him for it when I know how much pain he was in. And when I think back to the last words we said to each other this evening, and the look on his face when he left... I almost want to blame myself more than him. Deep down I know it’s not my fault. Even if we hadn’t talked or seen each other at all, he probably still would have done this to himself.

It takes me almost half an hour to drive the five miles over to Laurel Canyon, and I spend the last half of the journey cursing Adam’s name. Because I’m an asshole, and because I’m frustrated with just about everyone and everything right now. And because of course he has to live right in the middle of what is possibly the busiest area of Hollywood. Not that Tommy and I live on the most easily accessible street, or in the most tourist and traffic free neighborhood. But we don’t live nextdoor to fucking Chateau Marmont. My only routes for getting to Adam’s house without going completely out of my way are via Hollywood Boulevard or Sunset Boulevard. On a Friday night. On a holiday weekend.

And then, when I finally do get to his house, I have to spend another fifteen minutes trying to find street parking while dodging oblivious party guests, and trying to share what is basically a one lane road with countless Ubers, Lyfts, and what I can only assume are locals who seem to be under the impression that they can see oncoming traffic from three streets away, and who take every blind turn they come to at twenty miles an hour over the posted speed limit.

Seriously, fuck Adam.

I know he’s not to blame for any of this. But for whatever reason, it makes me feel better to blame someone specific rather than cussing under my breath at no one in particular. And it’s easy to blame him because I’m still irrationally pissed at him for things that actually were his fault.

Once I’ve found parking several streets away and walked back to Adam’s house, I text Terrance to let him know I’m here, and he meets me at the front gate to guide me through the bustling house and into a bedroom, where he has sequestered a totally unconscious Tommy.

The sight of him lying there, with his densense entirely down, makes me feel defenseless somehow.
I’m not even really sure what I’m supposed to do now, how I’m supposed to handle this. I don’t want to wake him up, and even if I did wake him up, I’m not sure how capable he’s going to be of walking out to the car. I feel like dragging him home right now is just going to give him one more thing to hold against me.

The more I try to help him, the more he seems to resent me for it.

“What’s up with him?” Terrance asks, finally breaking my focus on Tommy and forcing me to tear my eyes away from his unmoving form. “He said he was fine, but… this isn’t fine.”

“No, it’s not.”

“So what’s goin’ on?”

“It’s his mom.” I sigh as I take a few slow steps closer to the bed. “She’s not doing so great.”

“But… he said she was doin’ better.”

“When?” I frown, glancing back at him in confusion. “Tonight?”

“Yeah. We all asked how she was, and he said ‘better’.”

“Well, you can pretty much take whatever he has to say on that topic and assume the opposite is true. It’s not exactly his favorite thing to talk about right now, and he’s developed a nastly habit of… fudging the facts in order to avoid discussing it with anyone.”

“Got it.” Terrance acknowledges sadly. “I guess that’s his way of dealing.”

“By not dealing?”

“I know it looks like that from the outside, but I think it’s just a front he puts up so he can deal with shit in his own head, without having to let everyone else see what he’s really feelin’.” He explains
with a helpless shrug as he gazes down at his friend. “You know, I was there when he found out his dad had passed. I was right there. I’d never been with someone at the exact moment they found out someone they loved had died.”

“Me either.”

“He barely reacted. We were all so worried about him and askin’ him if he needed anything, but it was like he wasn’t even there. He was just sorta… gone.”

“It feels like he’s ‘just sorta gone’ now, too, in a way.”

“He’s in there, somewhere.” He offers me a small, hopeful smile. “He came back from what happened to his dad, he’ll come back from this.”

Except that “this” hasn’t even really happened yet. If this is how he’s dealing with Dia being sick, and the knowledge that she’s likely not going to beat the cancer, how the hell is he going to deal with her actually dying? By going catatonic?

And what if Terrance is wrong? What if we’re all wrong? All these theories that everyone has come up with to explain his behavior sound perfectly plausible, and I want to believe that they’re right. Because at least then I would feel like I have some idea of what he’s thinking or feeling, and I’d have more hope that he’ll eventually reach a turning point and come back to me.

But the truth is, none of us have any clue what’s going on in his head right now.

“Is there anything I can do?” Terrance asks me quietly, uncertainly.

“I don’t know…”

“Want me to help you get him out to the car, at least?”

“Sure.”
“Do you wanna take one arm and I’ll take the other, or do you want me to just…” He mimes throwing Tommy over his shoulder, and despite my less than cheery mood, I can’t help but laugh softly at the mental image he just conjured. “Done it before.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah, but he was awake at the time and he beat my ass for it.”

“I find that hard to picture.”

“It’s true! He literally beat my ass.” He continues to insist, balling his hands into fists and beating them against thin air. “With his boney valley boy hands. Hangin’ upside down and cussin’ himself hoarse.”

“Sorry I missed it.”

“Pretty sure someone got it on video.” He smirks, though there’s still a distinct sadness about him as he reaches down and gently takes one of Tommy’s arms, helping me to lift him off of the bed. “I’ll see if anyone’s still got it.”

Between the two of us, we manage to navigate Tommy through Adam’s house and out to the driveway. And I try to ignore the strange looks cast in our direction by the other party guests the entire way. After briefly debating whether or not to basically carry Tommy all the way to the car, or to have me go and get the car while Terrance tries to single handedly keep him on his feet, we settle on the latter.

It takes some maneuvering to get him into the passenger seat without bashing his head on the car doorframe. He’s barely any help at all, and he can’t even seem to sit upright without Terrance grabbing him by the sleeve of his shirt and pulling him back when he starts to slump over the gearshift. But once we’ve got the seatbelt securely fastened around him, and the seat reclined just enough to keep him in place, he passes out again within minutes.

“You gonna be okay?” Terrance asks me, handing me Tommy’s cell phone as I stare down at his expressionless face through the passenger side window. “If you want some help at the other end, I can-”
“Thanks, but you’ve already spent enough of your night babysitting him.”

“What’re friends for, right?”

“Well, you’re a damnd good friend.” I smile gratefully, slapping him amiably on the back before making my way around to the other side of the car. “Thanks, Terrance.”

“You got it.”

I’m about to get into the car and start the long journey back to our little corner of the Hollywood Hills, when I suddenly think of one last favor I need. “Hey, Terrance?”

“Yeah?”

“Can you not let Tommy know that you know about his mom? I mean, if you think you can get him to tell you the truth without letting on that you already know, go for it, and god speed.” He smiles faintly as he nods in understanding. “But if he figures out that you know…”

“He’s gonna know who told me.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t want to ask you to lie to him-”

“Nah, it’s cool.” He waves my concern off like it’s no big deal for him to lie to his friend (even though his friend lied to him).

But it’s pretty obvious that it’s not “cool”.

Nothing about this is.

Tommy doesn’t so much as groan or turn his head for the duration of our trip home. At one point,
while we’re stopped at a red light on Hollywood Boulevard, I actually reach over and check his pulse. I know how fucking ridiculous that is, but he’s so, so still, and I can’t take my eyes off of the road for long enough to stare at his chest until I can tell whether or not it’s rising and falling with each breath.

Once we get home, I shake him gently to see if he’ll wake up and cooperate so that getting him into the house will be easier on both of us. And lucky for me, he actually opens his eyes. He’s still not a hell of a lot of help, but with my arm locked securely around his waist, he puts one foot in front of the other and only almost pulls us both down to the ground about three times between the car and the front door.

And as soon as I open the front door and see the staircase looming in front of us, I kinda wish I’d just let him sleep it off in the car.

“Where we goin’?” He mumbles tiredly against my shoulder. “Bed?”

“Couch.”

He whiles like a petulant child, stubbornly resisting my attempts to guide him through the family room. “Bed.”

“You really think you can walk up the stairs right now?” I sigh.

“Please?”

I can’t tell if he’s aware of the pout on his lips, or the pleading look in his eyes. It seems as though he should be too drunk to know how to be manipulative. Or it could be that I’m just that much of a push over.

After taking a deep breath and readjusting my grip on him, I turn us around and head back towards the stairs. And to his credit, he does put as much effort into helping me as he’s probably capable of right now. There are a few precarious moments where I’m convinced that he’s about to lose his balance and send us both tumbling to our deaths, but we eventually make it safely up to our bedroom.
I lower him gently onto the bed before tugging off his boots and tossing them in the general direction of the closet. I’m not about to try to get him out of his clothes; I’m too tired, and it won’t kill him to sleep in his jeans. But when I try to help him to shift further onto the mattress so that his legs aren’t hanging gracelessly over the edge, he grabs the front of my shirt and pulls me closer.

And then he kisses me.

It’s careless and clumsy, and he tastes overwhelmingly like whatever kind of alcohol it was he drowned his sorrows with tonight. The taste is so strong that I wouldn’t be surprised if I got a buzz going just from kissing him. And I wish that I wasn’t so damn tempted to let myself kiss him back, to drown my own sorrows in him the way he very obviously wants me to. But I know it would be a mistake.

Sleeping with him has never felt like a mistake to me before, never, and I don’t want that to change.

“Tommy-”

His kisses become more insistent the second I try to pull away even slightly, and he pulls me closer so suddenly that I almost lose my footing and fall on top of him. Which is probably exactly what he was hoping would happen. While I’m busy trying to stay on my feet, he manages to nudge (or rather shove) his knee between my legs and press his thigh snugly against my crotch. If he’d been even a fraction more forceful, it could have really hurt. But it doesn’t hurt, not even a little. Not physically at least. It’s the knowledge that I can’t just give in to him and let this happen that hurts. It doesn’t seem fair.

I want him. I miss him.

But there’s no doubt in my mind that, despite how close he’s trying to pull me right now, he’s not gonna want anything much to do with me tomorrow when he’s sober.

“Stop.” I sigh as I grudgingly pull out of his grasp and step out of his reach.

“You said.”

I frown, resisting the urge to move closer again so that I can try to hear his slurred, mumbled words
“You said you’d be whatever.” Even though I caught every word of what he just said, it still makes zero sense to me. “You said…”

“Just… try to get some sleep.” I coax him as I cautiously lift his legs up onto the bed, while simultaneously keeping a close eye on his hands in case they try to grab me again. “We can talk about it tomorrow.”

“Don’t wanna talk.” He mutters miserably, rolling onto his side so that his back is to me and I can barely hear what he says next. “Don’t wanna sleep…”

Despite that oh so convincing assertion, he’s out again almost instantly.

Sleep doesn’t come as easily for me, but I didn’t really expect it to. And yet I somehow find myself awake before Tommy the next morning, even though it took me hours to get to sleep, and any sleep I did get was far from restful. I have a strong desire to pull the sheets over my head and try to escape back into unconsciousness, but it occurs to me that I’d be missing out on a perfect opportunity to visit Dia. I haven’t seen her since the paramedics loaded her into that ambulance. When I was at the hospital on Thanksgiving, I insisted that Tommy and Lisa take all of the visiting time. And then yesterday I never even set foot in the hospital because I was basically told that my presence there was neither needed or wanted.

But Tommy is more than likely going to be sleeping his drunken stupor off until noon, and then he’ll be functioning at a much slower pace than usual because of the epic hangover he’s probably going to be suffering from. If I slip out now, I can get in a visit with Dia before he even realizes I’ve gone anywhere.

He doesn’t stir as I shift off of the bed and grab some clean clothes before heading into the bathroom to take a shower. And when I emerge from the bathroom twenty minutes later, he doesn’t appear to have moved even an inch. He must have pushed the comforter off in the middle of the night, because I definitely remember covering him up before I went to bed. And it could be because my hair is still wet from the shower, or maybe it’s all in my head, but the room feels much colder to me than usual, so I carefully pull the comforter back up to his shoulders. He squirms very slightly, and I immediately let go of the sheets and freeze in case any further movements from me result in him waking up. But in the end he simply rolls over and all but burrows underneath the comforter.

I kind of hate myself for the smile on my lips, and for thinking he’s cute. It feels wrong, given
everything that’s been going on between us these past few days, but... I can’t help it.

I never could.

After swinging by Starbucks to grab a much needed coffee, I make my way over to the hospital in Burbank and up to the ICU. Visiting hours haven’t actually started yet, but it’s almost nine am, so I take a seat and watch the minutes tick past until then. Almost as soon as the clock strikes nine, I’m out of my seat and heading for the nurses station to get their distracted blessing to go into Dia’s room.

She looks better than the last time I saw her... but that’s not really saying much. I feel like I should comment on the fact that she has more color, or something equally cliché, but I have no idea what is and isn’t insulting in this kind of situation. I dig through my memories of the first few visitors I had when I was in the neuro ICU, trying to remember the things people said that made me feel better or worse. But it seems like so long ago now, and I was still pretty drugged up during those brief moments with my family after I first regained consciousness. All I really remember is feeling relieved to see them. Although, not nearly as relieved as they were to see me, no matter how bandaged and bruised I was, or how little awareness I had of anything that was going on.

When Dia turns her head to find me standing here in the doorway, the look on her face makes me think that maybe she feels the same sense of relief at the sight of a familiar face as I did back then.

“Hey, stranger.”

“They.” I greet her warmly, suddenly wondering if I’m allowed to hug her.

The day she was admitted, Tommy and Lisa had to wear masks whenever they came in here, and they weren’t supposed to touch her. Since the nurses didn’t insist on my wearing a mask before coming back here, I assume that’s no longer an issue. But I still don’t know if there are any other rules I should be following.

“I was wondering when I’d be getting a visit from you.”

“Sorry for the delay,” I smile ruefully as I take a seat in the chair by her bed and scoot it a little closer. “I didn’t want to cut into Tommy and Lisa’s time with you.”
She reaches out to pat me reassuringly on the knee, so I guess that answer my question about whether or not physical contact of any kind is still a no-no. “I understand, and I know they appreciated it. But it’s still nice to see you.”

“You too. You look…” Damn. I didn’t mean to say that, it just came out. And now I have to come up with a non-offensive way to finish the sentence. “Better.”

“Nice save.” She teases. “And I do feel better, actually. Well, better than I did on Thursday, at least. My doctor just told me that they might move me out of the ICU by the end of the day if I keep improving.”

“That’s great!”

“It is…”

“But?”

“It sounds like I’m still going to be in here for another week or so. And as much as I’m looking forward to going home, it’s hard to stay positive when I know that it’s only a matter of time before I’m back here again. I’m trying not to think that way; I know it doesn’t help, and I don’t want to be angry. But I’m finding it difficult to not be at least a little bit bitter right now.”

“You have every right to be bitter about what’s happening to you. When Lisa told me what the doctor’s said yesterday-”

“Lisa told you?” She frowns in confusion. “Not Tommy?”

Double damn. Getting Tommy in trouble is not going to make him any happier with me. “Uh… he…”

“Is he still keeping things from you?”

Yes. “We just… didn’t happen to discuss it.”
“You’re a terrible liar.”

“I try.”

“To be a terrible liar?”

“Yes.” I smirk, earning a hint of a smile from Dia, even though she narrows her eyes at me in feigned scorn. “I was way too good at it for way too much of my life. I’m kinda proud that I apparently suck at it now.”

“You wouldn’t happen to be trying to change the subject, would you?”

“From what?” I ask innocently.

“Take your pick.” She draws in a long, tired breath, and the effort that it takes her to do that one simple thing is hard to ignore. “Tommy’s compulsive lying by omission, how awful I’m sure I look right now, the fact that I’m…” Her voice falters and she pauses for a moment before forcing herself to continue. “That I very likely won’t be here next Thanksgiving.”

I want to tell her that she doesn’t know that, that maybe the doctors are wrong about how long she has, that people beat the odds and live longer than the doctors expect them to all the time. But that feels naive, like false hope, and I know that’s not what she needs right now.

“Lisa told me that you want to stop treatment?”

“If it hasn’t made any difference so far, and there’s no real chance that it’ll make any difference going forward, then it seems like a waste of the small amount of incredibly precious time I have left.”

“I know.”

“And you don’t have any objections?”
I laugh softly, shaking my head in surprise at the question. “I have no place asking you to continue putting yourself through all of this if it’s not helping at all.”

“Not even on Tommy’s behalf?” She presses knowingly.

“No, not even then. It’s not that I don’t get why he feels the way he does; I know he’s not ready to… let go. None of us are. But he’ll come around eventually. He doesn’t want you to be sick and in pain, he wants you to be able to make the most of your time with us, I know he does. But I don’t think he knows how to admit that without feeling like he’s giving up too easily.”

“I know. I’ve felt that way, too. I don’t want him, or any of you, thinking that I gave up without trying everything I could. But the doctors are telling us that nothing they can do will change my prognosis at this point. The thought of all of the things I’m not going to be here for is already breaking my heart… I refuse to miss out on anything else if I can avoid it.” She bows her head for a moment, but not before I notice the tears welling in her eyes. And even if I hadn’t seen them, I could clearly hear them creeping into her voice with every word. “We didn’t even get to have Thanksgiving this year because I was stuck in this damn hospital bed. I’m not going to get another Thanksgiving, this was it, and it’s gone.”

“It doesn’t have to be.” I place my hand over hers on the hospital bed sheets, giving it a gentle squeeze. “I don’t know about you, but the things I’m thankful for on Thanksgiving are things I’m thankful for pretty much every other day of the year. We can have Thanksgiving whenever you want. I know it’s not the same-”

“No, it’s a very sweet idea.” She insists gratefully, wiping her eyes. “Besides, if we do it when we choose to, instead of doing it at the same time as the rest of the country, maybe Tommy will enjoy it more.”

“True. He does love to feel like he’s bucking the system and doing his own thing.”

“Exactly. Sounds like a win-win to me.”

There’s a small smile on her face, but it doesn’t quite reach her eyes. There’s still so much obvious pain, sadness, and fear in them, and no amount of cheerful chit-chat will erase those emotions. There are no reassurances I can offer her to put her at ease, I can’t even promise her that Tommy will come around to the idea of her stopping treatment eventually.
I want to believe that he will; the man I married would. But lately I’m having a very hard time predicting what he’s going to say or do at any given moment. He doesn’t react to things the way I think he’s going to, or handling things the way I know he’s capable of handling them. Maybe he’s forgotten how to, or maybe he doesn’t even want to try anymore. Sometimes he seems hopelessly lost, struggling to find his way.

But other times it seems as though he’s defiantly determined to stay lost, especially if I’m the one trying to help him navigate through all of this.

Maybe I really do need to stop trying to help him. To him it probably feels less like someone is trying to help him, and more like he’s being relentlessly pursued and he needs to run further in order to escape. Maybe I should stay right where I am and let him come to me.

It works with Duke.

I know it’s stupid to compare Tommy to a dog, or any other animal for that matter. But if he’s in fight or flight mode, he’s acting on his base instincts, just like a frightened animal would. He needs to believe the threat has passed, that it’s safe to slow down and stop running. And as much as I hate to think it, right now I’m the threat. Or rather, my attempts to comfort him and get him to open up to me. So I guess I need to quit doing that.

Somehow.

And it probably wouldn’t hurt to offer him some kind of incentive to come home. Food tends to get Duke to come back whenever he goes astray…

Obviously, I’m not going to put out a bowl of dog food or shake a box of dog treats while calling Tommy’s name.

But I could put out the Tommy equivalent...

He’s never been able to resist my lasagna, no matter how many times I make it. Honestly, I think it has less to do with how it tastes, and more to do with the memories associated with the first time I ever made it for him. Of our first grocery store outing together, something most couples consider mundane, but that meant so much to us. It was a chance for us to feel like any other couple, even if
only for a moment. As was cooking dinner together (or him watching me cook dinner), having sex on the kitchen floor, and then eating lasagna in bed together right out of the baking dish. Aside from the part where I had to leave him and get on a plane to the other side of the country, it was the perfect evening.

It’s probably foolish of me to think that making lasagna for him will somehow remind him of how much he actually loves me, of how much we’ve been through, and how much stronger we are together.

But I’m all out of less foolish ideas.

So on my way home from the hospital, I stop by the store to pick up the ingredients I need, along with some dessert and his favorite red wine. I’ll just casually mention my dinner plans to him when he finally crawls out of bed, make sure that he knows it’ll be there waiting for him when he comes home tonight, no pressure...

But when I get home and go up to our bedroom to check on him, there’s no sign of him anywhere. The whole house is quiet, except for the constant clicking of Duke’s nails on the floor behind me as he follows me from room to room in search of our favorite person. It doesn’t make any sense. Tommy’s car is still at Adam’s, so he couldn’t have driven anywhere, and he never goes for a walk without Duke.

I pull out my cell phone and select his name from my favorite contacts, and after a few seconds he answers.

“Hey, where are you?”

“On my way to Adam’s.”

I frown as I wander into the family room and perch on the arm of the couch. “But you don’t have a car.”

“I took an Uber.”

“I could have driven you out there.”
“I didn’t know when you were gonna be home.”

“You could’ve texted me.”

He sighs heavily, and I kick myself for doing the exact thing I told myself I wasn’t gonna do. “It’s just easier this way. No point in you driving all the way there and then back again just to drop me off.”

“Sure.”

“And I’m gonna hang out with Terrance for a while anyway. He has to fly back to New York tonight, and he wanted to get brunch or something.”

“Okay… sounds good.” I pause for a moment, trying to adopt my most casual, care-free tone. “Speaking of food, do you think you might be home for dinner?”

“Not sure yet.”

“No problem. I was just planning on making lasagna, if you’re interested.”

He doesn’t respond, and I have to bite my lip to suppress a chuckle because I know how tempted he is. It’s a relief to catch a glimpse of the guy I know and love.

“Well, have a good lunch with Terrance. Tell him I said ‘hi’.”

“Okay.”

“Love you.”

“You too.”
I’ve never read too much into him saying “you too” in response to “I love you”. Mostly because he very rarely says it, he almost always returns the sentiment in full. And the few times he has used the truncated version, I was still so sure of how he felt about me that I had no cause to question if there was something wrong.

I guess I don’t have that certainty right now, because here I am wondering if there’s some deeper, hidden meaning to it. Or lack of meaning.

I haven’t even had chance to put my phone back in my pocket before the sound of the doorbell rings through the house, and Duke jumps up from the floor at my feet. He runs towards the foyer, barking incessantly, and I fight to pull him back by the collar so that there’s enough room for me to actually open the front door and see who’s there.

The last person I expect to see standing on the doorstep is Adam. But there he stands, looking incredibly awkward and unsure of himself, which is not a look I’m used to seeing on him.

“Hey, Taylor. How’s it going?”

“Uh…” Pretty terrible, Adam. And yourself? “It’s going okay, thanks.”

He smiles reaching out to scratch the top of Duke’s head, and earning himself a hand covered in dog slobber in return. “Is Tommy here?”

“He’s on his way to your place, actually. He said he was having brunch with Terrance.”

“Damn.” His shoulders slump in disappointment. “I knew I should’ve called first, but based on what Terrance told me this morning, I figured he’d still be sleeping off a killer hangover.”

That makes two of us. “Apparently Terrance is worth getting out of bed for.”

“I can attest to that.” He laughs softly, but the sound dies out quickly when he realizes that I’m not in a laughing mood. “Well… I should probably get home and try to catch him before they head out.”
“Okay.”

He turns to leave but almost immediately spins back around to face me again. “Actually.... do you have a minute?”

“I guess.”

“Can we talk?”

That phrase always sets alarm bells ringing for me. Not as loud as the ones its close relative, “we need to talk” invokes, but it still puts me on edge. Those words, coupled with the look of guilt on Adam’s face right now, makes it impossible for me not to be anxious about whatever it is he wants to talk to me about.

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