



Gone *with the* Sand

SIZZLE BEACH SUMMER

WEST GREENE

GONE WITH THE SAND

ENEMIES TO LOVERS MM ROMANCE

SIZZLE BEACH SUMMER

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Cover Design: Brynn Paulin

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For Riley, my reason for everything that I do.

*For every readers who loves an enemies to lovers, bully romance plot. I got
you. <3*

*And for everyone suffering from depression, anxiety, and PTSD, keep
chasing sunrises. I want you here. <3*

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NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR:

Some elements in this book may not be enjoyable for all readers. These include a bullying scene, PTSD, flashbacks, loss of a Marine in a war zone, bombing scene during a flashback, and depression.

If any of this is triggering for you, I advise against reading.

If you have any questions before diving in, please do not hesitate to reach out to me at authorwestgreene@gmail.com.

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PROLOGUE

Harlow

SENIOR YEAR OF HIGH SCHOOL

Forrest Gump said it best when he said, “Life is like a box of chocolates. You never know what you’re going to get.” And fuck if that wasn’t the case with Xavier Rawlins, the guy who lived to *try* to make my life hell. The truth was though, I got off on all the bullshit he spewed at me. Guess I had a thing for humiliation and degradation. At least, I did when it came to him.

But I could never get a read on him. Some days, he pretended like I didn’t exist. Others, he stared at me like he wanted to *consume* me. Then, there were days like today when he was focused on getting under my skin and doing his best to make my life a living hell.

But really, all he was accomplishing today was giving me a massive fucking headache...and a hard-on.

I’d never had a problem with Xavier, and though I probably should by now, I still didn’t. Grudges were a waste of time and energy. In a few months, we’d all be graduating, and I’d be leaving shortly after to head to Fort Benning, Georgia for basic training. None of these guys were on my radar.

Well, except Xavier. And I mean, why wouldn’t he be? He was gorgeous with dark, wavy hair that hung over into his eyes, always in need of a

haircut, and his eyes were equally as dark. I also knew that when he was turned on (even if he was trying to hide it from me), those dark eyes turned into melted pools of dark chocolate.

My favorite kind of candy.

“I think it’s bullshit we all have to share a changing room with a fucking—”

I arched a brow at Xavier when he looked in my direction. “I’d advise you not to complete that sentence, Xavier,” I coolly warned him. I put up with a lot of his shit, mostly because I found it amusing, but even I had my limits. And being called a faggot was one of those.

I fucking *hated* that word.

He scoffed but chose to be smart. “Keep your eyes pointed at your locker,” he bit out before turning away to snatch his shirt off. Just to irritate him and make him squirm, I blatantly stared at him, a smirk on my lips.

Xavier was perfection—hard muscle everywhere, not an ounce of fat on his lean body. He was a track star and also competed on the swim team, which meant right now, he was bare of any hair. And fuck if I didn’t love it—secretly, of course. Telling Xavier I was hard for him might get my ass kicked by his buddies. While I wanted to taunt him, I wasn’t keen on getting involved in a fight. My record had to stay clean for the military.

Feeling my stare on his back, Xavier turned his head, a disgusted look twisting his features when he caught me staring. But was it really being caught when I *wanted* him to see me watching?

“Fucking look away, perv,” he snapped, but there wasn’t as much bite to his words as there should’ve been, and I could see his cock through the imprint of his shorts; the fucker was half-hard.

Man, what I wouldn’t give to show him how good it could be with a guy.

I just *slowly* ran my eyes over him, watching the way his fingers tightened on his shirt before he moved it in front of his stiffening cock. I looked back up, letting his dark eyes meet my blue ones before I licked my lips and readjusted my dick in my briefs, not giving a fuck if he saw how hard I was.

His cheeks flushed, his eyes widening the slightest bit. His tongue slipped out to lick over his bottom lip, and I bit back a groan.

I'm on to you, Xavier, I thought. You're not as good at hiding your sexuality as you think you are.

I turned away, ignoring the muttering he was doing with his little friends. I heard my name being tossed around along with a few derogatory words, but I ignored them, focusing on changing and getting into the gym on time.

Someone shoved me, slamming me against the lockers. I groaned when my nose hit the metal, blood spurting from it. I clenched my fists at my sides, forcing myself not to retaliate. My future was more important than Xavier's concern over being outed.

Xavier leaned into me, his hand on the back of my neck. He tightened his grip to the point I knew I'd be wearing his bruises for a few days. I bit back a moan. I loved being handled roughly.

“You try some shit like that again, and I'll become your worse fucking nightmare,” he hissed. “Consider the bloody nose a fucking warning.”

With that, he stormed out of the locker room. I licked the blood off my lips, tasting the metallic flavor on my tongue before I headed into the bathroom to clean my face up.

...And get my dick under control.

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1

Harlow

I'd been home for months now, and it still didn't feel normal.

What was normal even like anymore? I had no fucking clue. I didn't know how to be a civilian anymore.

I'd made a dumb choice a little over four years ago to take the fast track to be independent. I joined the military, and wanting something that challenged me and got my blood pumping, I signed up for the Army's infantry division.

Worst fucking mistake of my life. It had changed me in all the wrong ways, and I'd lost so much.

Too damn much.

I didn't know how to be around people anymore. I freaked my mom out one too many times after coming home after waking up from flashbacks and lashing out at her, and she told me I had to get out. She didn't ask if I was okay. She didn't try to figure out a way to help me. I was impeding upon her day-to-day life, and it was bothering her.

Yet, despite my numerous warnings to her in my letters—that I wasn't the same eighteen-year-old boy who left—she begged me to come home and spend time with her before trying to figure out my next step.

She lasted two weeks. Exactly two weeks on the dot. And thankfully, I was already in training with the Sizzle Beach Fire Department to become a lifeguard. I hadn't been able to sit still for long—the silence was too much. It was too quiet for my overactive head. The screams. The terror. The deaths.

So, I found a home for sale in Sizzle, put a down payment on it, and moved in as fast as I could. I completed my training and did my best to bury myself in work.

Today, my real job began as a lifeguard, and I wasn't sure if I was ready for it. I thought it would be all fun and games until I realized how quiet it was most of the time. And I wasn't sure how my brain was going to handle that.

Gussed I was going to find out, though.

But too much silence could be...dangerous.

The tile flooring beneath my feet sent shivers up my spine as I got out of bed. It was hot outside—already nearing ninety this morning and it wasn't even ten yet—but my air conditioning was keeping my house a cold sixty-eight degrees.

I didn't do well in hot temps. It was too close of a reminder of the desert and all of the horrors I endured there. But the lifeguard stands had fans and helped keep me cool so my anxiety would remain at bay.

I blew out a soft breath as I stared at my reflection in the mirror, trying to relax my tense muscles. I looked tired, but hell, I always did these days. And I looked older than just twenty-two. PTSD and the flashbacks that accompanied it kept me awake most nights. I was always lucky to get even just two hours of sleep. But I was used to it, had learned to function on that small amount.

Get your head in the game, Harlow, I reprimanded myself. You don't have time for self-pity.

Shaking my head, I snatched up my toothbrush. Time to get my shit together. If not for my sake, then I needed to get it together for Carl...the one who hadn't been able to make it home.



I BLINKED. And then, I blinked again. Because there was no goddamn way Xavier fucking Rawlins was walking toward me. Toward the goddamn lifeguard stand I was getting ready to get into.

I'd honestly thought Mr. Hotshot would've gone to some big, fancy college and worked in some big, fancy office wearing a suit and tie. Thought he would've married some hot woman who spent her mornings at yoga and had coffee dates with her gossiping little rich friends.

He frowned at me as he drew closer, his eyes narrowed on my face like he was trying to figure something out—probably wondering where he knew me from. Doubted a closeted asshole like Xavier remembered the guy he bullied. Bullies hardly ever remembered those they lashed out at.

His mouth dropped open, and his steps stuttered as he drew closer. “Holy shit—Harlow Bishop?”

I grunted. So he *did* remember me. I was a bit shocked. “That'd be me.”

He shook his head in disbelief. “Are you fucking kidding me? What are you doing here?” he asked with a bit of bite to his words.

I rolled my eyes. Xavier sure as fuck hadn't grown up, and he hadn't changed either. He was still the same douchebag guy he was in high school. I couldn't say I was all that fucking surprised, really. Guys who were bullies rarely ever matured enough to change their ways.

“Working,” I bit out. I climbed into the lifeguard station without another word. Because I *had* changed. Life had changed me. *Death* changed me. I wasn't the same stupid, young kid I was in high school. I didn't have the energy to give Xavier back as good as he gave me. I didn't *want* to.

“I can't fucking believe they paired us together. This is bullshit,” he growled, climbing in behind me and dropping into one of the other chairs. “I'll be talking to the chief about this.”

I shrugged, not caring either way. I was just here to do my job and go the hell home. Being in the military quickly taught me that who I liked and who

I didn't like didn't damn matter. All that mattered was protecting the men around me.

"You do that, Xavier."

He glared at me, obviously wanting a reaction, but he wasn't getting one. I just wanted to make it through this day, go home, and try to get through the rest of the evening and night.

The nights were always the worst.



I FROWNEED, lifting my hand to knock on the chief's office door. After our shift, he'd called both me and Xavier here. I'd seen Xavier on his phone a few times, texting someone. If this abrupt meeting was anything to go by, he'd been texting our boss.

I did not have the energy to deal with Xavier's childish behavior. I really didn't.

"Come in."

I pushed open the door, and Xavier and I both stepped in. He'd been sending little jabs my way all day, trying to get a rise out of me, but it wasn't going to work. Xavier was nothing but a rude little boy still, no matter how hot he was. And while I'd definitely still bang him without a second thought, I was *not* willing to interact with him in any capacity outside of that unless it had to do with work.

"Sit. Both of you," Chief ordered, pointing to the brown leather chairs in front of his desk.

I grunted and dropped into one of the chairs, Xavier taking the only other one available beside me. The leather creaked beneath my weight. Chief pointed at Xavier. "You will work with who I assign you with, am I clear? The only time I want to hear a complaint is if Harlow does something that's against our rules and regulations."

Xavier scowled but nodded his head. I *almost* smirked. Bet he wasn't used to not getting his way.

"You will *not* make Harlow's job harder either, do I make myself clear, Xavier?"

Xavier sighed, nodding his head again. Chief grunted. "Good." He looked at me. "I know you two went to school together. I don't know what happened in high school. And I don't care. But if either of you," he said, pointing a finger between us, "cannot seem to handle putting aside your differences and working together, then you will be fired. The lives of the people coming to the beach are more important than whatever animosity there is between you two."

"Understood, sir," I told him. Xavier mumbled something next to me. Chief narrowed his eyes at him.

"Speak louder, boy," he barked.

Xavier sat up straighter, swallowing thickly. "I understand, Chief."

"Good. Now get the hell out of my office."

We stood and filed out of the door. Xavier glared at me once the door was shut behind us. "I don't fucking like you, Harlow."

I smirked, though I felt anything but amused at the moment. "Feeling is mutual, Rawlins."

With that, I walked past Slater and Colwyn, who were walking down the hall toward the chief's office, nodding once at both of them. Colwyn clapped a hand to my shoulder as I passed. I had no doubt he'd be reaching out to me later to check on me. I knew I looked like shit, and a meeting with the chief wasn't normally a good thing.

Colwyn had retired from the military, and he knew a soldier when he saw one. Which meant he also understood the mask I kept on my face.

I forced a tight smile to my lips, hoping to placate him, but he frowned, obviously seeing through it.

I sighed.

One military member couldn't fool another—not when both had seen horror.

I forced my feet to move again, just wanting to get home. I could drop my mask there.

But not a goddamn moment sooner.

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Xavier

I could not fucking believe Harlow Bishop was in Sizzle Beach, much less working for the fire department as a lifeguard. I mean, what were the damn odds that the guy I'd secretly crushed on in high school when I was too afraid to come out of the closet was now forced to work with me? Not to mention, I'd bullied the hell out of him.

And now, I was forced to see the face of one of my victims every day.

Was life cruel or what? Because right then, it felt like it was laughing right in my face.

I nodded once at Joe—short for Joanna—the owner of Joe's Coffee Bar. In the mornings, she sold coffee. In the evenings, it turned into a sort-of bar, and she served alcoholic drinks.

She set my regular down in front of me—a sad bottle of Bud Light. My basic ass didn't even want it in a glass. I came from basic shit, and I was happy with it. A hard lesson I'd learned early on was when I started wanting more, I started getting disappointed.

And I didn't like feeling disappointed.

Like today.

I'd *told* Chief I didn't want to work with Harlow. Not for selfish reasons though. I didn't want to work with him because it wasn't fair to Harlow. But Chief thought I needed to be taught a lesson from my younger days and own up to my shit.

So, he was forcing me to do that. Fucking cock sucker.

"Well, you look mighty fucking happy," Colwyn drawled, taking a seat on the stool beside me. I grunted when Slater took the one on my other side. I already knew I was about to get an interrogation, and frankly, I wasn't in the mood for one.

What I wanted was some peace and quiet to figure out where in the hell to go from here. But now that these two fuckers were here, that wasn't happening anytime soon.

"What do you want?" I muttered before lifting my beer bottle to my lips to take a sip.

"Want to know what in the hell is going on with you and the new guy," Slater said, leaning back in his chair and resting his ankle on his knee—the poster boy for relaxation.

I rolled my eyes. "Nothing is going on," I grumbled, looking back at my drink.

"Really?" Colwyn asked, not believing me for a second. Never expected him to, though. He was good at calling people on their bullshit. Frankly, I thought he got off on it, but I wasn't ballsy enough to tell him that to his face. Colwyn could be a scary mother fucker when he wanted. "Chief doesn't talk to people privately in his office unless they did something stupid. So, what happened?"

I sighed. "I tried to get out of working with Harlow."

Slater snorted. "Bet that went swell." I cut him a dark look. He just met my gaze evenly. "Well, why the hell don't you want to work with Harlow? He's quiet. Keeps to himself. Doesn't bother anyone. Really, you think about it, he's kind of the perfect person to be stuck with all day."

I sighed. They really weren't going to let this go. "We have...history," I finally settled on.

"Hmm," Colwyn hummed, sounding a little intrigued. "History. What kind of history?"

I scrubbed my hand down my face. "Can't you two just leave it fucking be?" I asked, slamming my hand on top of the table. Neither of them even flinched. Not the least bit surprised by my outburst.

"Nope," Slater said, popping the P. I glared over at him. He arched a brow at me. "Either you can tell us, or we can hound your new best friend about it."

I sneered at him. "Harlow is *not* my fucking best friend."

Colwyn snorted. "Well, that sounded full of hostility. What's the story, Xavier?"

I grumbled under my breath about them being dicks and nosy ass pricks, but even still, neither of them let up. Goddammit.

"Christ. I bullied him in high school, okay? He's gay, and I fucking gave him shit for it."

"What an asshole," Slater muttered, casting me a disgusted look for a moment. "You're fucking gay. Why the hell would you target another gay guy? Hell, why the fuck would you even bully anyone at all?"

I huffed, leaning back in my chair and draining the rest of my beer. "Because I was a dick," I told him honestly. Colwyn grunted in agreement. "And I was a closeted gay in high school, though I'm pretty sure Harlow saw through that. He called me out enough on my boners as it was. But my reputation meant more to me."

Colwyn shook his head. "You and you dumb teens," he grumbled. "I'll never understand why you guys do half the shit you do these days."

"Alright, *old man*," I mocked, glaring over at him. I knew I was stupid back then. Young and dumb. More worried about what my peers thought about me than being true to myself.

I'd matured. I'd changed. And Slater and Colwyn both knew the kid I was back then was not the man I was now.

Colwyn snatched my beer away just as Joe set it on the table and knocked it back just out of spite. I scoffed. "Dick."

He just grinned at me.

"So, what's your plan here?" Slater asked, sitting forward, his eyes focused on me.

I shrugged. If I knew the answer to that, I wouldn't be sitting here contemplating my fucking life choices.

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Harlow

I didn't sleep for shit the night before, but that wasn't really anything new. But what *was* new was having to down two energy drinks this morning to even get myself motivated. Things were getting worse, and I was worried about what my therapist was going to say when I told her.

I was doing everything I could to avoid sleeping medications, but pretty soon, I knew she would put her foot down on it. And with my lack of sleep now beginning to affect my day-to-day life, I knew that during this next appointment, she was probably going to at least prescribe me a low dose.

I just hated the way the meds made me feel. But I couldn't keep living like this. I knew I couldn't. I was barely surviving out here.

Survivor's guilt was a shitty thing to have to live with. But because I'd been injured, Carl hadn't made it. He'd been trying to console me. To get me to safety.

And it killed him.

I clenched my jaw. I just wished I was stronger to get through this shit on my own without the addition of medications.

The military had fucked me up and left me with scars that went way deeper than the surface of my skin. Losing Carl had altered me in a way that could never be reversed.

I looked over toward the door when Xavier walked up into the lifeguard stand, a frown pulling at his lips. He nodded once at me and took a seat, crossing his arms over his broad chest. The beach wasn't busy yet, but it wouldn't be long before people started flooding onto the sand and getting in the water.

Xavier seemed to be keeping to himself today—or more correctly, just lost in his head—but I didn't care what his reason was for the silence. I was only thankful for it. I wasn't in the mood for him to talk to me.

Hell, I wasn't in the mood for anyone. I was tired. Drained. I just wanted to sleep, but I knew that wasn't going to happen.

Xavier and I would never have a real truce. He was obviously too set in his childish ways to ever change. But maybe today was proof that we could at least do our jobs here without jumping down each other's throats all the time.

I could only hope so.



I CHECKED traffic from both directions before jogging across the road, heading deeper into the neighborhood I lived in. My house had been too silent after getting off work, and I couldn't sit still either. Hence why I was out here on mile three of my run.

I wasn't stopping until my head was silenced.

I was pretty sure the old lady on the corner thought I was crazy. I'd passed her house numerous times already. I was barely even winded. I just wanted some kind of pain. Something else for me to focus on besides being miserable.

Hell, I rarely felt sane anymore. There was too much fucked up shit in my head and trauma for me to work through for me to ever be considered normal again. Misery had become my daily company.

I craved some kind of structure. I needed it. I needed something to take my mind off of Carl. Off of what I'd seen. What I'd endured. But there was

nothing out here that met my needs. And even if I wanted to rejoin the military, I wouldn't pass the mental evaluation to even get through MEPS. That was how fucking far gone I was.

"Fuck—watch out!" a guy yelled. He was coming down the sidewalk on the same hill I was running up, and he was losing control of the bicycle he was on, panic flooding his features, which meant he was no longer thinking clearly.

A body slammed into mine before I could even begin to move, knocking me off the sidewalk and into the grass of some random person's yard. I groaned, the wind knocked from my lungs. I heard the bicyclist scream, and then a loud crash followed.

I blinked, trying to clear my head and get my bearings. The person who slammed into me rolled over onto their back, panting. Grunting, I looked over to see who the hell had saved me, and my eyes widened when they landed on Xavier.

What the fuck?

He was the *last* person I ever expected to help me. I honestly would have just expected him to stand there and watch as some dumbass riding on a sidewalk he shouldn't be on crashed into me.

"Fuck," he wheezed. "What the hell do you eat, Harlow? Goddamn bricks?"

I couldn't help it. I snickered. And for some reason, his presence quieted the chaos in my mind. I closed my eyes, drawing in a deep breath, enjoying the peace inside my skull. I didn't even care that it was my enemy that made the noise shut the fuck up. I'd take whatever I could get at this point, no matter where it came from.

"Thanks," I finally uttered.

Xavier groaned and stood up from the ground, his once-white t-shirt now covered in grass stains. "Chief would've kicked my ass if I let you get hit," he muttered.

I rolled my eyes.

Still a dick.

I stood as well, brushing off my shorts. “Well, thanks again.”

He just grunted and turned, walking off from me without another word, the muscles in his back tense. I frowned after him.

If someone had asked me earlier today, I’d have told them I had Xavier Rawlins all figured out. But now...I didn’t know what to make of him anymore.

And I wasn’t sure how to feel about that either.

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Harlow

I *t was hot. Sand was hitting me in my face, and my skin was burning from the sun. It was eerily silent as we waited on the signal from our Captain.*

Too silent, actually. And it left a bad feeling in my stomach. The muscles there were knotting tighter and tighter together, warning me to get the fuck out before it was too late.

But I couldn't move. Disobeying orders wasn't something anyone did. The military didn't pay us to think. They paid us to just do what we were told.

That was when I saw her. She couldn't have been much older than eighteen, and she had a bomb strapped to her chest. Chaos quickly ensued. One of the guys panicked and moved, and someone who had control of the bomb from far away set it off.

When I came to, someone was pulling me away, shouting orders. Gunshots were blasting out all around me. My hip was on fucking fire, and my ears were ringing. My back and head ached something fucking fierce.

A medic loomed over me and tapped my cheek, shining a light into my eyes. "Bishop, can you hear me?"

I managed to nod my head at the words I was sure he spoke, but I could only read his lips. I couldn't hear anything over the gunfire and the loud

ringing in my ears from the explosion. Someone loaded me onto a litter, and I groaned in pain.

“Hip,” I rasped.

“Got burned in the explosion,” Carl said as he strapped me so I wouldn’t fall off. “You’re going to be alright. We’re going to get you to base.”

My eyes fluttered shut, and just as they lifted me, one of them was shot, the blood splattering over my clothes. I hit the ground with a thump, Carl’s name ripping from my lips in a roar.



I SHOT UPRIGHT, sweat running down my body in rivulets. My sheets were soaked. It was still dark outside, and a glance at the red digits on my clock told me it was only about five in the morning. Too early for work. And if I’d been a normal civilian, it would’ve been too damn early to even be awake.

Leaning forward, I braced my elbows on my knees and scrubbed my calloused hands over my face, my heart still racing like I was still stuck in the desert in that tiny ass town, still staring at Carl’s lifeless face with his blood splattered all over my uniform.

A chill raced down my spine.

I grabbed my phone off the charger and scrolled through my contacts until I found the name labeled Chief. After shooting him a text that I couldn’t make it in today, I turned my phone off and padded out to my patio, dropping into the lounge chair to watch the sun rise over the beach. There was no fucking way I’d be able to work today. I was sluggish. Worn down. Fucking bone-deep tired.

I stared up at the sky as it slowly lightened. Carl would never be able to see the sun rise again, which was his favorite time of day. He always told each of us to keep chasing the sunrises when we got lost in our heads. So, despite how fucking hard it was for me to keep going, to keep breathing, most days, I chased every sunrise I could just for him.

I leaned my head back, staring up at the sky as it slowly began to change colors, my chest aching for the best friend I'd ever had. Carl had been a goof, but he'd been one of the best guys I'd ever known.

And now, he was gone, nothing more than a memory in my head.

All because he'd tried to save me.

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Xavier

I frowned when Colwyn stepped into the lifeguard station, setting his cooler down beside his chair. I looked at my phone, wondering if I'd gotten my day off mixed up, but nope. I was definitely scheduled to work today, so where the hell was Harlow? He was supposed to be working with me. Chief had been pretty adamant about that.

"You're working today?" I dumbly asked like it wasn't obvious.

Colwyn nodded, thankfully not calling me out on my dumb question. "Harlow called out."

Called out? That didn't seem like him.

I frowned, looking out over the beach, but it was still pretty dead. School was still in session, not letting out for another week for the summer, so we still had a little bit of time to chill.

"Do you know why?" I asked him, my curiosity winning out over my pride.

Colwyn shot me a weird look, probably wondering why I was so worried about someone I supposedly couldn't stand. I wouldn't meet his eye. I didn't understand why I was so worried either. I mean, hell, I still didn't understand why I shoved Harlow out of the way when that dumbass biker came riding down the hill way too fast.

And the way Harlow had looked at me when he realized I was the one who'd saved his ass...

He looked at me like I held world peace in my hands, and it was still making my mind spin. Because after all I did to him, how the fuck could he have looked at me like that?

“No, I don't,” Colwyn finally said. “I imagine he's probably just sick.”

I didn't say anything else about it, and since I knew Colwyn liked to work in peace, I kept my mouth shut, just trying to get through the day.



BY THE END of the workday, I'd decided I was going to go check on him. Harlow just didn't seem like the kind of person to miss work, and dammit, I couldn't get him or what happened the other day out of my head.

The way he had looked at me...

I just hoped he didn't punch me in the nose for invading his personal space without his permission. The old Harlow might not have. The old Harlow might have even expected me to not give two fucks about his boundaries. But the new Harlow... it was clear he'd been through something. And when he'd first gotten here, I hadn't cared.

But something changed the other day. The whole fucking world shifted with that look in his eyes. And I was still trying to find my footing. Still trying to navigate whatever happened—whatever shifted.

Colwyn dipped pretty quickly once our shift was over, and instead of going home like I normally would, I headed straight in the direction of where Harlow lived. A quick text to the chief asking for his address so I could send him something to eat and attempt to make amends had easily gotten me the information I needed.

Perks of living in a small beach town, I supposed. People were quick to trust. Then again, Chief and I both knew he would have my ass if I acted out of line.

Harlow lived in a small, white house with blue shutters. The curtains were open, allowing me to see inside to the open floor plan. He had minimal furniture—just the necessities: couch, coffee table, TV mounted on the wall—and his living room was separated from his kitchen only by a kitchen island.

I rang his doorbell, but when I didn't get an answer, I rang again. Frowning when he still didn't come to the door, I sighed and went to the side of the house. His backyard was fenced, but there had to be a way back there, right? Maybe he was out back and couldn't hear the doorbell.

Finding the fence unlocked, I pushed it open and stepped through. Walking around the house, my eyes widened when I found him asleep on one of his sun loungers that were out on his deck, which faced the ocean. I could hear the waves crashing against the shore, filling me with peace.

Thunder suddenly rolled in the distance, and I frowned, looking up at the sky. Clouds were rolling in, and at the speed they were moving, we didn't have long before it hit Sizzle Beach. Storms were usually pretty ugly here.

Hoping I wouldn't get my ass kicked, I locked his gate and walked over to him, reaching down to gently shake him. He lurched into a sitting position before I could even open my mouth to call his name. His hand latched around my throat, tightening to the point I couldn't breathe, his eyes wide and his nostrils flared.

I choked, wrapping my fingers around his wrists. His eyes widened a little more, and he blinked before he quickly released me as if I'd burned him. I dropped to my knees, coughing and spluttering. Reaching up, I rubbed my throat, wincing. I would *definitely* be bruised later.

“Fuck,” Harlow groaned, reaching up to scrub his hands over his face. Finally, he looked at me. “I'm fucking sorry. You okay?”

I weakly nodded and stood to my feet. “Storm is rolling in,” I rasped, my throat aching something fierce, burning with every word I spoke. “Came to check on you.”

He winced and stood to his feet, apologies residing in the depths of his eyes. “Come inside. No sense in you walking to your place when it's about

to come down out here. You walked, right?”

I nodded at his back, but he saw my reflection in the glass of his sliding doors. He pulled open the door and gestured for me to walk in ahead of him. I turned to look at him as soon as the door was shut, thunder rumbling again. Lightning streaked across the sky in the distance.

“Harlow...”

“Not now,” he mumbled, shaking his hand. He brushed his palms over his buzzed hair. “I know I almost choked the fuck out of you, but I just need a few minutes.”

I nodded, blowing out a soft breath. If he needed that, I would give it to him. After all, he hadn’t asked for me to sneak into his backyard and scare him half to death.

My eyes tracked him as he moved through his house, his expression pinched.

Harlow, what happened to you?

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Xavier

I wasn't sure how to handle what just happened. On one hand, my dick was hard just remembering Harlow's hand around my throat. But my mind was warning me that what just happened was dangerous, and it wasn't sexual in any way.

What had happened to Harlow after high school?

"Do you have something I can make dinner with?" I blurted. I didn't know why I was suddenly asking about dinner of all fucking things, but I needed something that would occupy my hands and my mind, or I was going to start pressing for answers before Harlow was ready to talk. And I knew after that episode, I needed to tread carefully.

Harlow nodded and waved his hand in the direction of his kitchen as he took a seat on the couch, looking tired and worn down. "Yeah. There's plenty. Just, uh, find something."

I nodded and walked into his kitchen, rummaging around in his freezer. I found a bag of frozen shrimp. Dumping those into a pot and putting them on to boil after adding some Zatarain's, I rummaged around in his pantry, coming up with a jar of Alfredo sauce and a box of spaghetti noodles.

It would do. Wasn't five-star gourmet by any means, but it was enough for dinner.

I put the noodles on to boil, and then scraped the Alfredo sauce into a large mixing bowl, adding some salt, pepper, a pinch of garlic, and a little bit of crushed red pepper. I could feel Harlow's eyes on me as I mixed it, but I did my best to ignore his stare.

In high school, my mom had remarried a jackass. My dad was a piece of shit, and my stepdad wasn't much better. It'd left me spiraling, unsure of how to take out my aggression, which was one of the reasons I'd bullied Harlow. It made me feel like I had some kind of power in my life again after the little bit of happiness and freedom I'd found after my mom's divorce had been ripped right from my hands by her new husband.

And then when I figured out I was gay... Well, Harlow was the perfect outlet for that, too. Because I didn't know how to come out to anyone. I remained closeted.

So, I didn't actually expect him to open up to me. Not after everything I'd put him through when we were teens. And I hadn't exactly been a nice guy when our paths ended up crossing again.

In reality, he owed me nothing. Even though he'd choked me, he still didn't owe me a damn thing.

Which was why I was surprised when he opened his mouth.

"I served in the military after high school," Harlow suddenly spoke up when I was in the midst of draining the noodles. I glanced up at him for a moment before focusing back on what I was doing so I wouldn't burn myself. "I went through some traumatic shit. I've been diagnosed with depression and PTSD—post-traumatic stress disorder," he clarified. I knew what it was, but I let him talk, not interrupting him. "I can't sleep most nights. And if I get woken up unexpectedly or something surprises me, I basically react how I did this afternoon when I was choking you."

"So don't do anything unexpected." I nodded once, trying to lighten the mood a little. "Got it."

Harlow chuckled and shook his head at me. There was still a darkness lingering in his gaze, but it wasn't as deep as it had been when I first woke him up, which relieved me. "Why'd you come out here, Xavier?"

I swallowed thickly, keeping my gaze focused on mixing the noodles and sauce together. “I, uh...” I blew out a soft breath and turned to grab the pot of shrimp off the stove, draining those next. “I was worried?” It came out as more of a question than a statement. “Just didn’t seem like you to not come to work,” I muttered.

Harlow grunted. “I don’t like to miss work, no. But I barely slept last night, and I was exhausted. There was no way I could’ve helped someone today if they needed it.”

Silence fell between us. I made two bowls of food and set them on the table. Harlow joined me as I sat down. “What’ve you been up to?” Harlow randomly asked me. “After we graduated, I mean.”

I shrugged. “Was lost for a little. Didn’t know what I wanted to do. Then, I joined the fire department here. I had to get away from home.”

Harlow hummed. “Shit parents?”

I snorted. My mom used to be pretty decent, but she couldn’t stand being alone, and she had a bad habit of choosing asshole men. My father and my stepfather were proof of that. And in the end, she chose them over me. “That easy to tell?”

He smirked. “Most bullies have a rough home life and need something to ground them and make them feel in control. Signs were all there.”

I grimaced. Damn, I hadn’t realized I’d been so easy to figure out. I wasn’t sure how I felt about that. “I’m sorry about that, you know,” I said quietly, pushing a shrimp around in my bowl. “I, uh...” I cleared my throat. “That wasn’t the only reason though.”

Harlow set his fork down, intrigued now. “Oh? Do tell. I can’t wait to hear this.”

I snorted, my cheeks turning red. I hated that I blushed when I got uncomfortable or embarrassed. “Um, I was closeted,” I quietly confessed. “Gay. Didn’t know how to tell anyone, and I didn’t like that I was attracted to you.”

Harlow nudged my knee with his, and I finally tore my gaze away from my bowl of food to look up at him. He was smirking, but there was no surprise on his face. “I fucking knew it.” I arched a brow at him. He chuckled. “Xavier, if you weren’t attracted to me, you wouldn’t have been hard every fucking day you saw me getting changed in gym.” He winked at me. “Your secret has been out for a while—at least to me.”

I chuckled and relaxed a little. “Are we good?” I asked. “I know that’s asking a lot, but—”

Harlow nudged my knee again, and this time, my heart skipped a beat in my chest. “We’re good, Xavier.”

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Xavier

Thunder loudly clapped outside, jerking me from my sleep. A moment later, lightning flashed through the room, lighting up the dark living room. I sat up and scrubbed my hand down my face, yawning. Thunder boomed again, and this time, Harlow jerked awake with a scream, his voice sounding hoarse. He lurched off the couch, his shirt clinging to his abs from sweat.

His sudden movements scared the shit out of me, not going to lie. I watched him like he was on the verge of attacking, waiting to see if he was okay. I'd learned my lesson last time. My throat now wore the light bruising of his handprint.

He looked around, his eyes landing on me for a moment. "Fuck," he finally rasped, storming out of the living room.

I frowned at his back, worried about him. How did he live like this? How could he survive on such little sleep? What had happened overseas? What had he witnessed that kept him awake?

I quickly got up and followed him. When I stepped into his room, he was sitting on the edge of his bed. He was bent over, his elbows resting on his knees. His face was in his hands as he drew in slow, deep breaths.

"Harlow?" I asked quietly, not wanting to shock him too much.

He looked up at me in surprise, like he forgot I was here with him just that fast. “Shit,” he muttered. “Did I wake you?”

Had he even seen me in the living room then? Or was he still only seeing the horror of whatever he’d endured?

I shook my head. “No. I woke up a moment before you did. Thunder woke me up. You okay?”

He laughed a little, but it didn’t sound like he thought anything was really funny. “You want the truth?”

“Always,” I instantly said. I didn’t care if that truth might scare me. I hated being lied to. And I wanted all of Harlow’s truths, even if I didn’t deserve them.

Harlow’s brows pulled low over his eyes. My heart ached at the distraught expression twisting his handsome features. “I’m never okay, Xavier.” Grunting, he gripped the back of his damp shirt and pulled it over his head, tossing it to the floor. Hard abs were revealed with a broad chest and thick arms.

I almost swallowed my tongue.

Forcing myself to get my head out of my ass, I headed into the bathroom I spotted through one of the open doorways and flicked on the light. After finding a washcloth, I wet it with cool water, wrung it out, and then walked back into the bedroom. Harlow was in the same spot he was in when I left. Silently, I took a seat beside him on his bed and began to wipe the cool cloth along his skin.

He shuddered, a soft sigh leaving his lips. “Fuck, that feels good,” he murmured, letting his head hang down, his elbows resting on his knees again, his hands dangling in front of him this time.

“My mom used to do this when I was a little kid after a nightmare,” I told him. It was one of the few good memories I had with her. “It always helped soothe me back to sleep.”

Harlow chuckled. “I don’t know if it’ll soothe me back to sleep, but my dick is waking up.”

My eyes widened in surprise at how blunt he was. He turned to look at me, and I swallowed thickly. My hand tightened around the washcloth in my hand, my pulse kicking up in speed. Harlow licked his lips. "If I kiss you, will you punch me?" he teased.

I shook my head, at a loss for words. I had no idea what was about to happen between us, but if it was what I was thinking, I didn't want to stop it by opening my mouth. I'd always had a thing for Harlow, and now that I was no longer closeted, I could finally have this.

It felt almost too good to be true with all the history between us.

His lips tentatively met mine, and that was it. It was all the push either of us needed. The cloth fell from my hand, plopping to the hardwood floor, and I eagerly kissed him back, deepening the kiss. He growled and yanked me closer, his teeth aggressively sinking into my bottom lip. Groaning, I opened my mouth, tasting the blood on my tongue. He licked into my mouth, pushing me back to lie on the bed.

He ground his cock against mine, his weight settling on top of me. I groaned and rutted against him as well, spreading my legs to accommodate his body. He moved from my lips and continued rutting against me, grinding our shafts together. I panted, my eyes rolling back in my head. We were still fully clothed, yet this was the hottest sexual experience I'd ever had.

"Ha-Harlow," I groaned, a shudder wracking through my body. I dug my fingers into his ass cheeks, needing more friction.

"Fucking hell," he snarled. His hand wrapped around my throat, and my eyes rolled back in my head, my orgasm washing over me. I came in my shorts just that fast, growling his name. He followed a moment later and slumped on top of me, his face turned into the curve of my neck.

"Shit," I finally whispered.

Harlow chuckled. "Is that a good shit?"

I wrapped my arms around him, my eyelids falling shut. "One of the best. But now I need a shower," I confessed. "I'm not a fan of being a cold, sticky mess."

Harlow grunted and moved off of me, heading into the bathroom. I sat up and pushed my fingers through my hair before following him. He already had the shower started when I got in there and was pulling his shorts down his legs.

He was thick and long, ready to go again. The tip was red and swollen. Fuck, how was his rebound time so fast? I was still soft, though the beautiful sight of him completely bare to my hungry eyes was slowly stirring my cock back awake.

With a smirk thrown in my direction after he caught me staring, he stepped into the shower. I quickly pulled off my clothes and stepped in with him. I barely even got to feel the water on my skin before Harlow shoved me back against the wall and dropped to his knees in front of me.

“Fuck!” I shouted when he sucked me into the back of his throat, his tongue lapping at me, cleaning my cum off of me. Fuck not being able to get hard again. The second his warm, wet mouth wrapped around me, I stiffened.

I gripped the back of his head, panting, my balls already drawing up tight again. A man with that kind of mouth should be *illegal*. It was good—almost too fucking good. Tingles raced up my spine. My legs shook as I thrust into his greedy mouth. His tongue laved over my cock like a lollipop as he fondled my balls with his other hand.

“I’m going to cum,” I warned him, every muscle in my body tightening in anticipation.

He only sucked harder, and my eyes rolled back in my head. I spurted down the back of his throat, and he greedily swallowed everything I had to give him before gently popping me out of his mouth. Then, he licked up around my cock and balls, being extra gentle as he cleaned all the cum off of me.

“You good?” he asked once he was back on his feet, a pleased smile on his lips.

I just nodded my head, my eyes half-lidded. “I think I need to go back to sleep,” I mumbled.

He chuckled. “Shower first, then we can crash back into bed. When’s the last time you were with a guy, Xavier?” he asked.

I flushed, looking away from him. “I, um, a little over a year?”

“I’m guessing you haven’t gotten to experience much,” he noted. When I shook my head, he sucked my bottom lip between his teeth, gently nipping at the tender flesh, making it bleed again. He licked the blood up, and if I could’ve gotten hard again, I would’ve. But I was completely spent. “I can’t wait to show you how good it can feel.”

Fuuuuck.

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Xavier

When I woke up the next morning, the sky was dark and stormy, and Harlow was trailing his lips over my skin, licking at the spots that made me shiver and sleepily moan. How did he know what spots would entice such reactions? He was too damn good at this.

“Harlow,” I rasped, groaning when he nipped at my nipple before sucking it into his mouth. I sighed, sinking further into the mattress, my dick throbbing. “What are you doing?”

“No work today,” he murmured, kissing his way across my chest to my other nipple. “Storm is too bad. Beaches are blocked off. And you’re just laying in my bed, naked and warm, practically begging me to fuck you.”

My breath hitched in my throat. “*Fuck*,” I growled. He couldn’t just say shit like that. “Harlow, you—” I moaned, cutting myself off when his hand wrapped around my shaft. It was slick with lube, sliding over me easily. I gasped in a breath of air, my legs parting and bending at the knee so I could thrust up into his hand.

Suddenly, his hand left my prick, and my eyes shot open to stare down at him in horror. Was he trying to fucking kill me here? “Wait—” I tightened up as soon as his hand slid between my ass cheeks, and my entire body tensed.

Then, he was kissing me, his tongue licking into my mouth. I relaxed back into the mattress, languidly kissing him back. “Stay relaxed for me,” he rumbled. “I’m going to make this feel really fucking good. I promise.”

I nodded, trusting him. He probed between my cheeks again, pressing a single, slick digit against my hole. I clenched my jaw before drawing in a deep breath, forcing myself to stay relaxed. “That’s it,” Harlow praised. He hissed a breath through his teeth as he inserted the first finger into me. “Fuck, baby, you’re tight,” he rumbled. “So fucking tight.”

I choked on a breath when his finger brushed over my prostate. “Har—*fuuuuuck*,” I choked out when he continued rubbing it. Tingles rushed over my body. My dick leaked onto my stomach. I was shaking and trembling, my breath sawing in and out of my lungs.

Within a few more seconds, I was coming all over my stomach, and Harlow took advantage, sliding another finger inside of me, working on spreading me open. I cried out when he brushed over that spot inside of me again, my body way too fucking sensitive. I wasn’t sure I could come again.

“P-Please...” I pleaded, shaking my head.

“You beg so prettily for me, baby,” Harlow murmured, a devilish smirk tilting his lips. “I’ll make the torture worth it. I promise.”

Before long, he was inserting a third finger. I was delirious, thrusting against his hand as he pumped his fingers in and out of me. “Need—Harlow, I need you inside of me,” I growled, looking up at him through slitted eyes. I was lost in a haze of lust, and I *needed* Harlow.

He slicked some lube on his hard, leaking cock before positioning himself between my legs. And then, he pushed inside of me, taking my ass for his own. Claiming it. I sucked in a sharp breath, the breath in my lungs stuttering at the fullness. He was so fucking *big*.

He leaned over me once he was fully seated inside of me, his eyes locked on mine, a primal look passing over his features. My entire body tingled in response, ready for him to devour me.

“You’re mine now, Xavier,” he rumbled. He gripped my chin, forcing my eyes to stay on his. “You hear me? *Mine*. Repeat it.”

I nodded. “Yours,” I promised. Then, I wrapped my hands around his throat and yanked his body down to mine, kissing him hungrily, licking into his mouth, claiming him, too.

He fucked me into his mattress, slamming his cock in and out of my tight ass, and while it burned, I was so lost in him that I didn’t even fucking care. He felt *amazing* inside of me, and I never wanted it to end.

He grabbed my cock and began to rub it with his slick fingers, jerking me off. My back bowed off the bed, a choked scream ripping from my lungs. “I need you to come for me,” Harlow rumbled, licking and biting at my neck. No doubt, I’d have bruises covering my throat later, but I couldn’t bring myself to care.

I’d wear them proudly.

“I’m—I’m—*Fuck, Harlow!*” I yelled, coming all over us both. With a roar, Harlow emptied himself inside of me, officially marking me as his from the inside out.

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Harlow

I slept peacefully for a good five hours before having a flashback, which was a record, to be honest. I was out of bed before Xavier because of it, but I wasn't surprised. After the first time I got inside of him, we proceeded to fuck three more times yesterday, which wore us both slap the fuck out. It was probably the only reason I slept that long, to be real.

And I was pretty sure Xavier was addicted to my dick, but I sure as hell didn't mind.

I'd been addicted to the thought of him for years, and now that he was officially mine? There was no holding me back now. I was going to ruin him in the best possible way, make him so needy for me all the time, he'd never think about going anywhere. He was the only reprieve I got from the chaos in my mind. He had a way of making everything quiet, and I was clinging to that with both hands.

Xavier finally emerged out of my bedroom, wearing only a pair of boxer shorts. His hair was a mess, and his eyes were slitted against the light coming in through my curtains.

"If we're going to do sleepovers," he rumbled, "you need blackout curtains."

I shook my head. “I spend enough time in the darkness in my head. So, that’s a no-go.” He grunted in displeasure and moved to the coffee pot, pouring himself a cup and adding so much sugar, I was surprised his teeth didn’t rot as soon as he took a sip. I grimaced. “That’s way too much sugar.”

He shrugged. “It’s sugar and caffeine or a possible murder case from all this fucking light.”

I laughed softly and then crowded him in against the counter before taking his lips in a soft, slow kiss. He groaned, his lips moving with mine like it was second nature. He tasted like coffee and a hell of a lot of sugar, and though I definitely wasn’t one for sweets, the taste of him had my dick plumping in my red board shorts.

My phone rang on the counter, disrupting us. Muttering a curse, I stepped back from Xavier and turned to snatch it up, sighing at the sight of Chief’s name on my screen.

“Yes, sir?” I asked, leaning back against the counter, watching Xavier sip his coffee and eye my dick in my shorts. I just smirked at him and grabbed it, teasing him. He narrowed his eyes at me.

“All hands on deck for clean-up down at the beach,” Chief instructed.

“Got it,” I told him, straightening up from my slouched position. “Xavier and I will be there shortly.”

I hung up the phone before Chief could comment on me and Xavier being together and arched a brow at my man. Damn, that felt good to say—my man. “Thankfully, I washed your clothes this morning. They’re in the dryer. Get a move on, babe. Got to do clean up at the beach.”

Xavier groaned but downed his coffee. I took the mug from him and turned to the sink to rinse it out before sticking it in the dishwasher. He headed to my laundry room, and a moment later, he came out, dressed and in his water shoes.

“Ready?” I asked, shoving my feet into my shoes.

He nodded. “Got to stop for more coffee on the way.”

I rolled my eyes and grabbed a to-go mug out of the cabinet before pouring coffee into it and adding enough sugar to turn him into a diabetic. After popping the lid on, I handed it to him. “No need to stop. Now let’s go.”

Xavier groaned like a dying walrus but followed me out my front door.



NO ONE WAS surprised we were together that day. I was pretty sure everyone expected it to happen sooner or later, to be honest. But because they were expecting it, it meant no one was all in my business trying to get details, which was just fine with me.

I hated it when people crowded me and made me feel put on the spot. It was a trigger, and I really did not need to be having a flashback in the middle of the damn day. Not with everyone around to witness me fall apart.

Because I would. I did every fucking time. Even this morning, when I’d jerked awake, I’d spent a good hour on the back patio, crying and trying to get my shit back together. The days were getting rougher. I couldn’t prolong telling my therapist how bad it was getting much longer.

With all hands on deck, it didn’t take us long to get the beach cleaned up, and Chief let us off early. Xavier sauntered up to me and pulled his shirt up to wipe the sweat off his face, revealing his toned, tanned torso. I licked my lips, and he shot me a wink in return.

“You ready to go?” he asked me as he closed his eyes to wipe the sweat from his eyelids. He dropped his shirt and opened his eyes, smirking when he saw my eyes still fixated on him. “See something you like?”

“Fuck yeah, I do,” I rumbled, stepping closer to him.

He chuckled and allowed me to kiss him, probing into my mouth, but then he pulled away. I narrowed my eyes at him. He just grinned. “I’m starving. If you want sex, you have to feed me.”

Slater laughed as he passed us. I flipped him the bird. Xavier ignored him. “So?” he asked. “What’s it going to be?”

I hummed and grabbed his hand in mine. “I’ll feed you. But then you’re mine for the rest of the night.”

His shoulder brushed mine as we walked off the beach and onto the boardwalk that led over the sand dunes.

Xavier gently squeezed my hand in his, giving me a feeling of safety I hadn’t known in months. Years, even. Not really since I’d left home and joined the military.

“You’ve got yourself a deal,” he told me.

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Xavier

Harlow was walking his fingers up and down my thigh as he slowly chewed his food, his eyes glued to my phone screen. The service was slow tonight due to how packed the restaurant was, so we were watching a movie on my phone with the volume turned all the way up. Subtitles were playing along the bottom just in case one of the groups near us got rowdy, which had already happened more times than I could count.

I never thought I'd see the day that Harlow and I could just sit and enjoy each other's company. I for sure thought that our past together would be too much for either of us to move past—my guilt and Harlow's hatred. But now, I was left wondering if Harlow had ever hated me. Even when he'd seen me again for the first time, he'd just seemed *tired*. Not upset. Not full of hate.

Just bone-deep exhausted.

I'd been the only one upset because I hadn't been sure if I could work alongside him knowing the guilt would eat me alive. He hadn't deserved a single thing I'd done or said to him in high school, yet because I was desperate to be in control of something when my home life was such shit, I'd targeted Harlow just to make myself feel better.

And Harlow didn't even fault me for it.

A loud explosion sounded on the screen during a surprisingly quiet moment in the restaurant. I looked at the screen, but then, Harlow knocked his plate off the table as he lurched off his seat, his eyes wild and panicked. I quickly jumped up as well right when one of the waitresses yelled at him for his carelessness.

Harlow shook his head, gritting his teeth, blinking his eyes, but one look into those blue depths, and I knew he wasn't in the room with us—with me.

Fuck. Fuck. *Fuck!* He was having a flashback in the middle of the day. In the middle of a crowded, busy restaurant where everything could go wrong if even one person panicked and called the police.

“Harlow?” I gripped his hands, but he flung them off, falling to his knees with a blood-curdling scream. I sank to my knees beside him, tears brimming my eyes. My heart was racing in my chest, aching for him and whatever he was reliving in his mind. I pulled my phone out and dialed Colwyn's number, not knowing who else might be able to help.

I didn't know what to do, and it was killing me.

I tugged Harlow into my arms on the dirty floor, clenching him when he began to sob, still lost in whatever was happening inside his head.

“Hello?” Colwyn asked in surprise. “Xavier?”

Harlow screamed again. I sobbed, curling my body over his. “Colwyn, I don't know what to do,” I cried, rocking Harlow in my arms.

Everyone was staring. I could feel their gazes on my back, but no one came close to help. I didn't dare look up. I understood why they were cautious about coming closer, but God, couldn't they see Harlow needed help? His mind was torturing him.

And it was ripping me the fuck apart inside.

“I'm coming,” Colwyn told me. “Tell me where you are, Xavier.”

“Henry's,” I choked out.

“I'll be there in a couple of minutes,” he promised.

He ended the call. “Carl,” Harlow sobbed. “Not you. God, not you!” he shouted, fighting something, his muscles straining. I tightened my hold on him so he wouldn’t lash out and accidentally hurt anyone.

“I’m here,” I choked out, wishing he could hear me. “I’m right here, Harlow. It’s going to be okay, baby.”

“Help him!” Harlow yelled, shattering my heart into tiny, little pieces.

I squeezed my eyes shut, my tears soaking his scalp. “I wish I could help you,” I whispered, feeling as broken as Harlow no doubt really was. “I’m here, baby.”

He sagged in my arms, all of the fight draining out of him just as Colwyn entered the restaurant. He shoved through the crowd and kneeled beside us. Harlow opened his eyes. They were bloodshot and rimmed with tears. I’d never seen him look more tired. I ran my hand over his buzzed scalp, my hands shaking as I caressed him.

“Hey, kid,” Colwyn said softly. “Let’s get you out of here, okay?”

Harlow numbly nodded, and Colwyn helped him off my lap. I pulled my wallet out and slapped a hundred on the table. Our meal didn’t cost nearly that much, but I couldn’t be bothered to find out how much our meal cost and settle the tab sensibly. I needed to be near Harlow. And hopefully, the massive tip would soothe the no-doubt overworked and overtired waitress.

I met Colwyn and Harlow on the sidewalk. Harlow was breathing deeply, the heels of his hands pressed to his eyelids. His entire body was shaking, and he was extremely pale.

“Har?” I asked softly.

He slowly dropped his hands, looking at me. I stepped closer to him but then paused, unsure if he wanted me when he was this fragile. Swallowing thickly, he dragged me closer to him, wrapping me in his strong arms. I clung to him, twisting his shirt in my fingers as I burrowed my face into the curve of his neck, breathing him in. He smelled like sweat and the ocean, and it calmed my racing heart some.

I just wished I could offer him the same comfort.

“Come on,” Cowlyn said gruffly, opening his back door. “Get in. Let me get you two home. Harlow needs rest.”

Without a word, Harlow released me and slid into the backseat. I slid in after him and then pulled him back to me, holding his trembling body in my arms. He rested his head on my chest, his arms wrapped around my midsection. His shaky breath fluttered over my shirt, bleeding through the material to warm the skin of my chest.

It didn’t take us long to get to Harlow’s house, and when we got out, he went on inside, not saying a word to Colwyn. I frowned, turning to face the older man.

He sighed, shoving his hands into his pockets. “I’m not offended,” he assured me. “Trauma is a fickle thing, and Harlow just had a *very* violent flashback. He needs to see his therapist tomorrow. From what I know, he hasn’t had a flashback in the middle of the day like that before. Do you know what might have triggered it?”

I shoved my hands through my hair. “We were watching a movie while we were eating. There was an explosion. He picked the movie, but I didn’t know—” I choked on my words, tears stinging at my eyes. I pressed the heels of my hands to them, sucking in a deep, sharp breath.

Colwyn settled his hand on my shoulder. “He may not have known either, Xavier,” he tried soothing me. “This isn’t going to be easy. He’s going to be out of it for a while. Just be there for him, and when he’s a little more stable, try to talk him into going to see his therapist tomorrow.”

I nodded, dropping my hands to my sides. Colwyn squeezed my shoulder before releasing me and sliding back into his car. I quickly went inside. Harlow was sitting on the couch, his shirt off, his skin glistening with sweat. Without a word, I settled on the couch beside him.

He looked over at me with tears in his eyes, his breath hitching in his throat. “That hasn’t happened before,” he croaked.

I opened my arms in invitation, and he quickly maneuvered himself into them, seeking my comfort. He pushed my shirt up, resting his naked skin

against mine, his ear pressed to my chest right above my heart. He clung to me, his arms steel bands around my torso.

“You need to see your therapist,” I whispered.

He nodded. “I already texted her to let her know I need to see her tomorrow. I’ll be going in first thing in the morning.” He squeezed his eyes shut, his lashes fluttering against my bare skin. “Please don’t leave me, Xavier.”

I linked my legs around him, suffocating him in everything me, but he settled some, his breaths easing a little bit, no longer so choppy and strained.

“I won’t go anywhere,” I promised him.

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Harlow

I hadn't felt this tired...ever, really. Not even when I was barely getting a lick of sleep. Not even when I pulled all-nighters on overnight watch while in the military.

This was a bone-deep weariness. A soul-deep tiredness. I was tired of living at this point, and I was *exhausted*. The only thing that kept me putting one foot in front of the other was Xavier's broken-hearted face flashing through my mind. Fuck, the way he'd cried over me shattered what was left of my heart after losing Carl.

Seeing him trying to be strong for me all while he broke apart too had nearly killed me inside.

I pushed open the door to my therapist's office. The receptionist, Katie, looked up at me with a soft smile. "Hey, Harlow," she greeted. "Go ahead and sign in here. I'll let Mabel know you're here."

I silently nodded my head and scribbled my name onto the clipboard along with the time and date before dropping into a chair against the wall. I closed my eyes and released a slow sigh, trying to calm my mind. But nothing was working.

All I could see was Carl, and when I managed to push his bloodied body out of my mind, I saw Xavier's tears running down his beautiful face.

Pulling my phone out of my pocket, I stared at Xavier's face on my phone background. We'd barely been together, but fuck, that man had a way of worming himself beneath my skin. He was inside me and all around me, and I wouldn't have it any other way. Fuck our past together. We were kids, and he was hurting. That boy had only wanted someone to hurt as much as he did.

It was wrong, but shit, I couldn't fault him. It wasn't his fault his parents were shitty human beings.

The door that led to the back offices opened, and Mabel's kind, older face emerged. "You ready, Harlow?"

I stood to my feet in answer and made my way to her. The hall we entered was narrow, but she was burning some kind of herb, and it was calming. My breathing came a little easier, and I relaxed as we dove deeper into the darker hallway. She kept the lights back here dim, and honestly, it helped. It gave me peace to be somewhere where I wouldn't be judged. Harder to judge someone in the darkness.

Her office was even darker, only a single, very dim lamp on in the corner. She had blackout drapes pulled over her windows, keeping the sunlight out. I took a seat on the comfy, black couch, and she sat in her recliner, crisscrossing her legs in the chair.

Mabel was in her forties, almost fifty, but she had the personality of a twenty-year-old. She believed in comfort over professionalism, and today was proof of that. She was wearing a pair of leggings with an oversized t-shirt naming her a "basic witch" with the Starbucks logo on the front.

"I was surprised when you texted and told me you needed to see me today, Harlow. What's going on?"

I sighed. "I had a flashback in the middle of the day. It was pretty violent. My boyfriend, Xavier, had to call a friend of ours to help."

"Where were you?" she asked, lacing her fingers together in her lap.

"Henry's. We were having dinner together before we were supposed to go to his place."

She nodded, nothing showing on her face. “Tell me what you were doing. What was going on around you? What do you think triggered the flashback?”

I sighed. “Numerous things could have triggered the flashback,” I confessed. “Henry’s was pretty packed. A lot of the groups were being rowdy and loud. Xavier and I were watching a movie on his phone. I remember being thankful that there was a brief moment of silence, but then an explosion happened in the movie.” I pushed the tips of my fingers against my eyes; they burned to the point they ached. “I don’t remember anything after that except being back in that fucking desert.”

“How’s your sleep lately?” she asked, surprising me when she didn’t try to delve deeper.

I frowned. “Pretty shitty,” I admitted.

She sighed. “Harlow, we talked about this. I told you that you needed to tell me if the flashbacks at night were getting worse because they could have escalated to this. And they did. Lack of sleep, anxiety, depression—it weakens your mind, in a way, and makes you more vulnerable. More susceptible to flashbacks.” She dropped her legs and leaned forward. “You have to go on medication, Harlow. You can’t keep living like this.”

My lips trembled, and tears burned in my eyes. “How is it fair that I get a reprieve from my torment when Carl doesn’t even get to live anymore? He doesn’t get to breathe. Doesn’t get to ever see his kids again.”

It wasn’t fucking fair.

She moved to sit next to me on the couch and grabbed my hands in hers. I hated that my fingers trembled in her grasp. “You can’t keep torturing yourself like this, Harlow. And after everything you’ve told me about Carl, I can’t, for one second, believe he would have wanted you to suffer like this.”

I knew she was right, but it still didn’t feel like the right thing to do. But I *had* to do better.

Not just for my own sake, but for Xavier. His parents had let him down, and from what I understood, he didn’t have anyone else. I was his family now.

And he deserved a hell of a lot better than the shell of a man I was. And if he was choosing me, I would fight.

For him until I was strong enough to want to fight for myself.



XAVIER FROWNED at the state of my fridge, shaking his head. “Harlow, we need to go grocery shopping.”

I sighed, leaning my head back. I’d been put on leave until Mabel deemed me fit for work again. According to both her and Chief, I was in no space mentally to work as a lifeguard. Because what would happen if I had a flashback while I was supposed to be helping someone?

I was a risk. And fuck, if that didn’t pour salt into my open wounds, even if I did understand and agree with them.

“Then go,” I grunted. I was in a foul mood, and I was itching for a fight. Xavier was doing his best to give me space without making me feel abandoned, and fuck, I loved and adored him for it, but my skin was crawling today with the need to just lash out. Make someone hurt as much as I was. Make someone as uncomfortable as I was inside.

I heard him quietly sigh. “Do you want to maybe go with me?” he asked. “It might do you some good to get out of the house.”

I rolled my eyes at him. “Do I look like I want to fucking go anywhere, Xavier?” I snapped. “What the fuck are you going to do if I have a flashback in the middle of the fucking grocery store, huh? Call Colwyn again because you can’t handle it on your own?”

He flinched, and that flinch cut me down to my fucking core. “Sorry I’ve never experienced anyone having a flashback before you, Harlow,” he said calmly, but I could hear the hurt lacing his words despite how hard he was trying to cover it. “But you still won’t let me help you, so I’m running blind here.”

I jerked to my feet, not wanting to deal with this. Not wanting to deal with his hurt. Especially when I was the one who caused it. “I’m going for a

swim,” I grunted.

“No, you’re not. You’re not doing this!” he barked at me, finally losing his composure, and the darker part of me was happy about it in a sick, twisted way. I slowly turned to face him, a simple brow arched in his direction. “Stop fucking running away from me—from this—Harlow!”

“You can’t fucking help me!” I shouted at him. Tears burned in his eyes, and I fucking *hated* it. “How the fuck can you help when you’ve had it so goddamn easy?!”

He clenched his fists at his sides, the keys to his car clutched tightly in his grip. “Easy?” he hissed. “I may not have gone through what you have, Harlow, but I haven’t had it easy either. But I finally grew the fuck up and stopped taking my shit out on other people.”

I barked out a laugh. “Before or after you decided lashing out at other people was the answer?”

He shook his head and took a step back from me, tears burning in his eyes. “Go swim,” he choked out. “I’ll have food delivered to you. I think we need some space.”

My heart wrenched in my chest. Fuck. No. No, no, no. He couldn’t leave me like this.

“Xavier,” I rasped, reaching for him, taking a step forward at the same time. Everything *hurt*, and he hadn’t even walked out the door yet.

“I can’t—” His breath hitched in his throat as he opened the front door. “I won’t stoop to what you want me to do, Harlow. I *can’t*. Because I can’t fucking hurt you like that. Not anymore.”

I gripped the back of the couch, feeling like my world was going to crumble. The foundation was cracking in several places, and if he walked out of that front door, even if it was just for the night, I would fall.

“Please don’t go,” I begged him. The agony in my voice made him turn around. The tears in his eyes fucking gutted me. “Please, baby,” I begged. “Just stay. Please. Goddammit, I’ll do better.”

He shut the front door and came over to me, dropping the keys on the table beside the couch. My breaths sagged out of me. He was staying.

Fuck, he was staying.

His hand was bleeding, and my eyes widened in alarm at the sight of his blood. But I didn't have the time to grab his hand to inspect the damage before he grasped my face in his hands, pressing our mouths together in a hard kiss. His blood smeared over my cheek, but I didn't care. I'd wear his blood everywhere if I could.

I broke down, tears sliding down my cheeks. He just kissed me harder, his bloodied hand sliding along my skin as he did his best to catch all my pieces while I crumbled in his palms.

"I'm sorry I'm such a mess," I croaked when he separated our mouths.

He pressed his lips to the corners of mine before peppering kisses to my closed eyelids. "All messes can be cleaned up," he whispered, his arms sliding around my shoulders.

I burrowed my face into the curve of his neck. "Please don't leave me," I pleaded.

"I won't," he assured me. "I'm here, baby."

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Harlow

Xavier and I had barely gotten any sleep last night. Every time I shut my eyes, I saw Carl laying on the ground, blood covering him. I heard my screams. Heard the medics trying to get me calm so they could get me help.

And because I couldn't sleep and Xavier was scared to leave me to my own thoughts, we stayed up most of the night, only dozing off every once in a while when exhaustion tugged us both under for a few brief moments.

"I don't want to leave you alone today," Xavier said, frowning down at his phone, his thumb hovering over Chief's name. I didn't want him calling out. He needed to earn his paycheck. I would be okay. Always was. I didn't have suicidal thoughts, and if I ever did, I knew to get help.

Xavier was my reason to live. I wouldn't quit.

I sighed. "I'll be fine, Xavier," I said softly, wishing I could do more to reassure him that he could leave me alone for a few hours. I really wasn't suicidal—had zero of those thoughts. But I knew he was worried nonetheless. He'd seen how tortured I was. And I couldn't hide that. I was falling apart at the seams.

"Harlow—"

A light knock on the front door cut him off. I frowned, wondering why whoever was here hadn't used my doorbell. And then, I wondered what the fuck someone was doing here at seven in the goddamn morning. It was too fucking early for visitors—not that I wanted to see anyone anyway—but seriously, *seven*?

Xavier walked to the door and opened it, frowning at the sight of Colwyn. Colwyn's lips tilted up into a smile. "Mind if I come in?"

Xavier looked at me. Sighing, I nodded. Xavier stepped back, letting Colwyn slip past him before shutting the door. Colwyn turned to Xavier. "If you don't leave now, you're going to be late for training."

Xavier clenched his jaw. "I'm not fucking leaving him, Colwyn."

"Baby," I called, drawing his eyes to me, "I'll be fine. I promise. Just go to work. You can't keep missing work because of me."

He looked so conflicted, it tore at my soul. Standing to my feet, I strode over to him and gathered him into my arms, leaning down to press my lips to his. "Go," I murmured. "If I can't handle it, I'll call you. I swear I will."

He sighed and burrowed his face in the curve of my neck, pressing his lips to the skin there. I shivered, clutching him tighter, not wanting to fucking let him go. But we were adults, and his responsibilities didn't stop just because I was drowning in my own ocean.

I could survive these waves. He needed to be with the people that might not be able to survive real ones.

Reluctantly, he let me go, and I dropped my arms to my sides. "Swear you'll call?" he asked.

I nodded. "On his grave," I rasped, referring to Carl, knowing that would mean the most to him.

Xavier nodded and grabbed his bag from by the front door before slipping out. I walked back over to the couch and dropped down onto the cushions. "Can I help you?" I asked Colwyn, not turning to face him.

He sank down onto the other end of the couch. “Xavier needed to work, and I don’t think you need to be alone today.”

I scoffed. “I’m a grown fucking man, Colwyn. I don’t need a babysitter. I’m not your wife.” It was a low blow, and we both knew it. Raleigh was a little and regressed quite often, especially on stressful days. She was an amazing mother, but when Colwyn was around, she allowed him to take charge of everything. I thought it was a beautiful dynamic, but today, I felt like lashing out at someone, and Colwyn was the closest target.

“I’m only going to warn you once on this. The next time, I’ll knock your fucking teeth down your throat,” Colwyn warned me. “Watch what the fuck you say about my girl, you hear me?”

I sighed and leaned forward, resting my elbows on my knees to scrub my hands over my face. “Fucking shit,” I muttered. “I’m sorry, brother. I don’t know what the fuck is wrong with me.”

Colwyn scoffed. “I do. You’re barely holding yourself together, Harlow. You’re hurting, so you’re lashing out at others to try to make yourself feel better. Which is why I’m here. Get dressed and put some shoes on.”

I turned my head in his direction, arching an eyebrow at him. “Where the fuck are we going?”

He stood to his feet. “To see Carl’s grave, Harlow.”

My face paled, and a bone-chilling coldness seeped into my skin. Vomit rose in my throat. “No,” I choked out. “I don’t know how the fuck you know his name or where he’s buried, but *no*.”

Colwyn gripped my upper arms and dragged me off the couch. I was too frozen, too fucking terrified of what Colwyn was suggesting, to fight him off as he dragged me through my house. “Yes, the fuck we are,” Colwyn told me, pushing me into my bedroom, and then he stood in the doorway, blocking my exit. “I will dress you myself, Harlow. Do not fucking test me. But running from him—from his ghost—is not going to help you, and Xavier fucking deserves better than this.”

I swallowed thickly, tasting vomit on the back of my tongue. I hated him for using Xavier against me. That man was my weak spot. “He can leave if he

wants to,” I bitterly responded, knowing those words were hollow even as I spoke them. I would fucking crumble if I lost Xavier. I wouldn’t recover.

Colwyn gripped my chin, narrowing his eyes at me. “You want to be that fucking selfish?” he snapped down at me. “Because if that’s the case, go ahead and call him. Tell him you’re breaking up with him. At least be a decent fucking human being and end it before he gets any deeper with you and he ends up devastated and shattered because of *you*.”

Pain wrenched through my chest. Snarling, I ripped my chin from his grasp. I couldn’t go through with what he was suggesting, and we both knew it. Cursing, I clenched my fists at my sides. “Give me five minutes,” I muttered.

Colwyn left my room without another word. Silently, I stripped out of my pajamas and tugged on a pair of jeans and a t-shirt. After washing my face and brushing my teeth, I snatched a hoodie out of my closet for the car ride. Once my sneakers were on my feet, I emerged from my room, grabbing my phone off the charger in the living room.

“Let’s go,” I muttered.

I was doing this for Xavier. Because Colwyn was right. He did deserve better.

The shit I did for that man should terrify me. But I couldn’t lose him, too.

I wouldn’t survive it.



I GRIPPED the fence post at the entrance of the cemetery, leaning over to empty my stomach. Colwyn placed his hand on my upper back, a silent show of support. Every part of me was struggling to walk through the fucking gates and down the path toward the back of the property, where Carl’s grave was.

My hands shook as I wiped the back of my hand over my mouth. Colwyn silently handed me a bottle of water, and I used it to rinse my mouth out before handing it back to him. Drawing in a deep breath, I forced one foot

in front of the other, though my legs were trembling. Colwyn trailed behind me. Every once in a while, I stopped and sucked ragged breaths into my aching lungs. I felt like there wasn't enough oxygen in the air, but I knew it was just me panicking.

By the time I made it to his plot, I felt like I'd been marching through the desert for days. My mouth was parched, so fucking dry, it was almost like I'd been sucking on cotton balls. My limbs ached. My lungs were screaming for air, and my temples were pounding with the worst headache I'd ever had.

But there it was, right in front of me. The headstone was clean, and flowers had been planted around it. Over where his casket was buried in the earth was fresh, green grass. Just how he loved.

God, he was always so excited to get out of the desert and get back home to grass and trees.

Slowly, I sank to my knees on top of his grave, my fingers reaching out to trace his name.

A sob tore from my throat. Tears raced down my cheeks.

"It wasn't supposed to end like this," I choked out. "You had everything to live for," I cried. "Why?" My shoulders shook, and I fisted my hands, banging them on his headstone. "*Why?!*" I yelled.

"Uncle Harlow?"

I slowly lifted my head and turned, looking at the two kids rushing toward me, their stunning, blonde mom trailing behind them. I rolled my lips into my mouth, but the sob rising in my chest almost choked me, forcing me to release the pitiful sound.

Carl's kids launched themselves into my arms, and I clutched them to me, crying so hard that I could barely drag air into my lungs. "Hey, kids," I rasped. I leaned back and ran my hands over their beautiful faces, my chest aching at how much they looked like their father.

Their father that they would never see again.

Fuck, it hurt to even think about. They lost so much so early in life.

“It’s good to see you again,” Meghan, Carl’s wife, said softly, running her hand over my buzzed hair. “I knew you’d come when the time was right. The kids missed you, Harlow. We all missed you. No matter if my husband is here or not,” she blew out a shaky breath, “you’re still part of our family.”

I burrowed my face in the kids’ curls, my entire body shaking. “I’m sorry,” I whispered. “God, I’m so fucking sorry.”

She gripped my face in her hands and brushed her thumbs over my damp cheeks. Her eyes were filled with tears, and one slipped down her cheek. “I miss my husband every damn day, Harlow. Every fucking day, I wake up with the pain of part of my soul missing. But I know he put himself in front of you for a reason. No matter how cruel and fucked up fate is, *everything* happens for a reason, and I cling to that with everything in me.”

I released her kids, letting them wander off to play so they wouldn’t be forced to hear this conversation. “How do you not hate me?” I rasped, not understanding. He’d been helping me. He was shot because of *me*.

“He loved you like a brother, Harlow. He made me promise if something ever happened to him, I would look out for you. And I’ve tried to give you your space, but not anymore, Harlow. You look a mess, and I know if Carl were here, he’d be kicking your ass.”

“You didn’t answer my question,” I reminded her, my voice shaky.

A watery smile tilted her lips. “I don’t hate you because I know he was happy. We lived a happy, fulfilling life, Harlow. He gave me two beautiful children. He gave me stability, something I’d never had growing up. He showed me how beautiful life could be as long as I didn’t always focus on the ugly parts. Our time together was up, and he gave up his life so you could have something beautiful, too.”

I wrapped my arms around her and hugged her to me. We sat like that for what felt like hours. Her kids rushed around the cemetery, laughing and squealing, Colwyn keeping watch over them as Meghan and I did our best to hold each other together, silently crying for everything we’d lost.

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Xavier

I hadn't heard from Harlow all day, but I was trying to be optimistic about it. No news was good news, right? It meant he was handling himself okay. And maybe Colwyn was still there with him, so he wouldn't be alone and couldn't go too deep in his head.

If anyone might know how Harlow was feeling, it was Colwyn. Even I knew no one retired from the military and didn't live through a tragic loss.

But still, not hearing from Harlow was wracking my nerves. And it took every ounce of my restraint not to reach out to him. To give him his space. I didn't want to smother him and make him lash out again because fuck, that had been horrible. It wasn't that I wanted to treat him like he was a fragile piece of glass, but at the same time, I knew everything was delicate.

I was never more relieved than when the end of my shift came. I quickly strode off the beach and headed toward Harlow's. I at least needed to check on him. After that, I'd go home and continue to give him the space he obviously needed, even if I hated being away from him.

Using the key Harlow gave me a couple of days ago, I unlocked the front door and pushed it open, immediately stopping on the threshold. My gut cramped, and my heart began to race.

It was quiet. Too fucking quiet. And Harlow's car was still in the driveway, which meant he should have been at home.

Swallowing vomit, I rushed into the house, shouting his name. But no matter how many lights I turned on or how many doors I opened, no matter where I searched or how loud I yelled his name, he was no where to be found.

Choking back a sob, I tried calling him over and over, but I didn't get an answer. I tried Colwyn next, my hands trembling so badly, I could barely scroll through my contacts to get to his name.

"Xavier?" he asked quietly.

I hiccuped. "Is Harlow with you?"

"Shit. He didn't text you?" I sniffled, fucking hating that I was falling apart, but I was so goddamn scared I'd lost him. "Yeah, Xavier, he's with me. He's asleep. We're about three hours from home. He's okay."

I sagged against the wall and slid down it until my ass met the cool tile. "Thanks," I whispered before I hung up the phone. I dropped it to the floor and then buried my face in my hands, sobbing out my fear, letting it be replaced by relief.

Harlow was okay.

Fuck, I never wanted to go through that kind of fear again. I had half a mind to punch him in his beautiful face when he walked through the door.



THE FRONT DOOR opened late that evening. I looked up from the cup of coffee in front of me to watch Harlow walk through the door. He was pale, his eyes bloodshot. Dark circles colored the skin beneath his eyes, and he looked tired as hell.

Immediately, I was on my feet, reaching for him. He sank into my embrace, his face buried in the curve of my neck. His arms wound around my torso,

and he clung to the back of my shirt, squeezing me like he was afraid I would disappear into thin air if he let me go.

“I already made sure he ate,” Colwyn told me. “He needs a lot of rest after today.” I wanted to ask so many questions. What happened today? Where did they go? Why did Harlow look like such a mess—even worse than when he’d left this morning? Why didn’t anyone tell me Harlow was leaving?

But I bit my tongue.

I nodded once at Colwyn as I ran my hand over Harlow’s scalp. His hair was slowly growing out, a little longer than the buzz cut he seemed to always keep. Colwyn nodded once at me and disappeared out the door, quietly shutting it behind him.

“Let me lock the door,” I quietly told Harlow as I ran my hand over his back. “Then, we’ll get you in the shower and get you to bed.”

He nodded and reluctantly released me, his arms slowly sliding from around my waist. I pressed a kiss to his temple before walking to the front door and flipping the lock. Then, I grabbed Harlow’s hand in mine and led him to his room and straight to the shower. He stayed silent as I turned the water on, adjusting the temperature until it was just right.

“I’m going to undress you. Is that okay?”

He just silently nodded again. I quickly stripped him out of his clothes, ignoring the worry pressing into every bit of my skin. I just pressed soothing kisses to his skin. His cock was hard as it sprang from his jeans, but neither of us paid it any mind. Now wasn’t the time for anything sexual. Harlow needed comfort.

I took my time bathing him, hoping I was able to convey how much I loved and cared for him through my tender touches. He slowly relaxed the more my soapy hands ran over his skin until his eyes were half-lidded, sleepiness tugging at his brain.

“Let’s get you dried off,” I murmured as I shut the water off. He obediently stepped out of the shower onto the mat, and after I wrapped a towel around my waist, I worked on getting him dried off.

Neither of us bothered with clothes as we tumbled into his bed. Harlow wrapped his body around mine, clinging to me, his legs tangled with mine. His warm breaths fanned my skin, quickly evening out until he was fast asleep with his head resting on my chest, one leg pinning me to the mattress, his other tangled between mine, his arms wrapped tightly around me.

I didn't sleep worth a fuck.



“YOU LOOK LIKE SHIT,” Harlow muttered when he finally rolled out of bed the next morning. For the first time since we'd been sleeping together, he hadn't had a flashback, which I was thankful for. But I finally gave up on sleep around five A.M. and slipped out of bed, coming to drown myself in coffee. I was going to need it if I had any hope of functioning as a normal human being today.

I just shrugged and handed him a cup of coffee—black, just like he preferred it. He took it from me before gripping my chin and pulling my lips to his in a soft kiss. “Come sit me with on the patio?”

I nodded and followed him outside. He tugged me down onto the lounge between his legs, and I relaxed back against him, my eyes shutting as the warm sun bathed over my skin.

“You're off today, right?”

“Yeah,” I grunted, taking a sip of my coffee. Even if I wasn't, there was no way in hell I would have gone into work today. One, I wouldn't have been worth a fuck on no sleep. And two, I *needed* to know what in the hell happened yesterday. I'd been stewing over it all damn night.

Harlow walked his fingers across my chest and then down my abs. “Good. I wanted to talk about where I disappeared to yesterday. I owe you an explanation. I remember how worried you looked when I got home.”

I sighed and swallowed down the rest of my coffee before setting it on the table beside the lounge. “Harlow, you don't owe me shit.” But fuck, I

really did want to know.

Harlow grunted in disagreement. “We’re in this together, Xavier, remember?” He gripped my chin and angled my head so our eyes could meet. “I’m not keeping shit from you. We’re not doing that. You hear me?”

I nodded. He leaned down and brushed his lips over mine before releasing my chin. I relaxed my head against his chest and closed my eyes. His arms wrapped around my chest, pinning me to him. But I didn’t want to be anywhere else.

“Colwyn took me to see Carl’s grave,” Harlow rumbled. I didn’t react—didn’t want to spook him—but hell if I wasn’t shocked by his admission. “I cried a lot. Fucking yelled. Spent some time with his wife and kids, and we had lunch together. It—” He blew out a harsh breath. “It helped, Xavier,” he said quietly. “For the first time since that fucking accident, I can *breathe*.”

I brushed my hands over his arms, and he snagged one of them, bringing it up to his lips to press tender kisses to my palm and fingers. “I love you,” he rasped.

I swallowed past the sudden lump in my throat. “I love you, too,” I promised. “But God, don’t ever scare me like that again.”

Harlow tightened his arms around me and buried his face in my hair. “Never again. I swear, Xavier.” He brushed his lips to my temple. “Will you take a nap? I’ll hold you, and I won’t go anywhere unless I tell you. I promise. I’ll never disappear like that again, baby.”

I nodded, letting my eyes slide shut again. He ran his hands over my chest in a soothing motion, and before long, sleep took me, my mind finally able to rest enough to allow me to fall asleep.

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Xavier

Harlow chuckled at my disgruntled expression, amusement glimmering in his eyes. I scowled at him, not understanding what he found so damn funny. “What?” I grunted.

We were currently at my apartment. He’d been back at work for a week now after finally being cleared by both his therapist and the Chief. Colwyn forcing him to go see Carl’s resting place helped tremendously, and slowly but surely, Harlow was finally making progress in his recovery. His flashbacks at nighttime were few and far between now, and he hadn’t had another flashback in the middle of the day.

He was taking anxiety and depression meds, as well as sleeping pills, but all of them were low doses—just enough to stabilize him so he could live life normally without the weight of his mental health weighing on his shoulders.

Even the dark circles under his eyes were beginning to fade, giving way to the guy I remembered back in high school—goofy, fun, and takes no shit. Not even from his closeted bully.

Fuck, those were the days. Not bullying him, but the way he always came back at me.

“You look like you’re having the time of your life over here,” Harlow teased.

I scowled. “I fucking *hate* laundry.”

Harlow laughed and snatched my sweats out of my hand before gently pushing me out of the way. “Find us something to eat, and I’ll fold and put your laundry away.”

I was going to marry this man one day, even if it was just for the sole purpose of him doing my laundry for me.

I sighed, beyond grateful for him. When he’d seen the state of my room, how I just had laundry baskets full of clean laundry, he’d forced me into my bedroom to put my clothes away. But I was used to living in chaos for a reason—laundry and I didn’t mix.

“You sure?” I asked, not wanting to be roped back into doing it, but not wanting him to do it for me if he didn’t want to.

“Folding and putting away laundry is calming for me. Since you like to cook, make us something to eat.”

I gripped his chin and turned his head back to me, planting a soft kiss on his lips. He sighed into it, his tongue coming out to lightly touch mine before we pulled away. Then, he smacked my ass hard enough to make me yelp. I rubbed my sore ass cheek, glaring at him.

“Food,” he ordered.

I rolled my eyes before slipping out of my bedroom and heading into the kitchen. After grabbing the ingredients I needed to make baked chicken and rice, I set the oven to preheat and began to prep and season the meat.

A loud knock sounded on my apartment door, and I frowned. No one had buzzed to come up, so maybe someone had the wrong apartment?

Harlow stepped out of my room, arching a brow at me, one of my t-shirts in his hand, a hanger in the other. I shrugged at him and washed my hands before going to answer the door. Harlow remained standing where he was, though he set aside the shirt and the hanger on my bar.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” I snarled when I saw who was standing on the other side. “How the fuck did you get in?” I demanded.

My mother sheepishly shrugged at me. She didn't look much different from when I'd left. Her hair was still dark—no gray to be seen. Her makeup was flawlessly done, no doubt hiding a bruise at this point. And she was dressed to impress in an expensive summer dress with golden sandals on her feet.

“I slipped through while someone was leaving. I knew you wouldn't let me up otherwise.”

Harlow pressed his hand to my lower back, a silent show of support. My mother's eyes flickered to him for a moment in surprise before moving back to my face.

“Damn right I wouldn't have let you up,” I sneered. “I've got nothing to fucking say to you.”

“Can I come in so we can talk like civilized people, rather than through a crack in your door?” she asked, her eyes flickering to the other doors in the hall.

I scoffed. “Like hell are you getting in my fucking apartment,” I snapped. This was my safe space, and already, it was bothering me enough just to know I could smell her expensive perfume. She was too close. Invading my safety.

“I left him,” she blurted. She reached for me, but I stepped back, my body pressing against Harlow's. He gripped my hips, steadying me and grounding me. “I left him, Xavier.”

I wanted so badly to believe that might mean something, that leaving my asshole of a stepdad might make things better, but it wouldn't. My mother would never learn to stand on her own two feet, and before long, she'd be with the next douchebag who slapped her around. And she wouldn't care so long as she got a credit card.

“You left him, or he left you?” I retorted. “Tell the truth,” I bit out when she opened her mouth to respond.

Shame crossed her features, and I barked out a laugh. “Yeah, didn't think so,” I sneered. Of course, he left her. She probably went over her spending limit one too many times, or he found someone younger and prettier than her. “Go fuck yourself, and don't ever show up here again.”

I slammed my door shut and flipped the lock, even sliding the chain into place for good measure. Harlow turned me around and pressed me against the door, his hands spanning my ribcage. He held on tightly, and though it hurt to breathe through his grip, it helped. “You okay?” he rumbled.

I closed my eyes and sagged, swallowing thickly as I nodded my head. “She wears me out,” I muttered, reaching up to scrub my hands over my face.

Harlow gripped my wrists and pulled my hands down. I slowly opened my eyes to look at him. “What happened, Xavier?” he quietly asked me.

A tired sigh escaped me. “Sit at the bar while I finish dinner, and I’ll tell you,” I murmured.

He brushed his lips to the corner of mine before stepping back. He headed straight to the bar and took a seat on one of my barstools. I took a moment to clear my head, and Harlow just watched me with that understanding, loving gaze of his while I slid the chicken into the oven.

Finally, I turned to face him, bracing my hands on the counter behind me as I leaned back against it. “My dad was an abusive jackass,” I began. “Smacked me around. Smacked my mom around. Called us every fucking degrading name in the book.”

Anger simmered in Harlow’s gaze, but he kept his mouth shut. “Mom finally left him. Divorced him, and it wasn’t an easy divorce by any means. And we got a restraining order to protect us, though he never came back around—just washed his hands of us after getting what he wanted out of the separation. But my mother has never worked a day in her life, and when she did begin to work to try to support us, she never held a job long.”

Harlow cringed, obviously knowing where this story was going.

“Three months after my dad was gone, she began dating another guy. I didn’t like him from the get-go. Didn’t take Mom long to start wearing clothes that covered her more either. Three months after they started dating, they had a courthouse wedding, and he moved in, taking over all of our bills. He fed Mom’s shopping addiction, smacked her around a lot. But I didn’t take shit anymore. I refused to lay down and just deal with it, so I fought back.”

Harlow's hands clenched on the countertop. I blew out a harsh breath. "He quickly learned I wasn't an easy target, so he kept his hands to himself, but that didn't stop him from treating me like shit and mentally wearing me down."

"Fucking hell," Harlow swore.

I swallowed thickly, bitterness coating my next words. "Mom chose him over me. When I turned eighteen and got this place, got a job with the fire department as a lifeguard, she wouldn't come. Said I didn't make enough to support her." She also said some other hateful shit I never wanted to repeat—like I'd never make anything of myself, that I'd never make anyone happy, how I shouldn't leave home and the man taking good care of us. "She thought I was an idiot for moving out and leaving the good man that supported us."

Harlow scoffed. "What a bitch," he muttered.

I shrugged. "I was determined. Even if it meant I was homeless, I got the fuck out of there as fast as I could. And I cut all ties with her. I didn't want shit to do with a woman who would choose abuse and money over her son. Her fucking flesh and blood."

Harlow stood and crossed the kitchen to me. The moment I was in his arms, breathing in the masculine scent of him, my body relaxed, and I sank into his hold.

"I'm proud of you," Harlow murmured into my hair. He gripped the back of my neck, his other hand splaying over my lower back. "I'm so fucking proud of you for having the strength to get out and stand on your own, even if it wasn't easy."

I buried my face in the crook of his neck and gripped the back of his shirt. "Thank you," I whispered. Hearing those words...fuck, it meant a lot. Because I'd had no one to tell me that I was going to make it. That everything was going to be okay. That they were proud of me for choosing the healthier road for myself, even if it was riddled with potholes, cracks, and broken bridges.

Harlow just pressed a lingering kiss to my temple in response.

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EPILOGUE

Harlow

I was nervous as hell for this. For an entire year now, Xavier and I had been together, making this shit between us work. It came with a lot of ups and downs. He was still working through his own trauma, just as I was working through my own. We butted heads like nobody's business, but I knew at the end of each day, we still loved each other.

And with love came compromise. A lot of it. We were no fairy tale couple by any means. I pushed him away when I was spiraling, and then yanked him back to me. He did the same with me, especially when I was hurting him by not letting him help me.

But all good things were worth fighting for, and he was the best fucking thing I'd ever had in my life.

Which was why I was doing this with him.

"He'll be here soon," Colwyn told me. Coincidentally, he and Raleigh were taking a sunset dinner cruise as well, and I'd been as surprised to see them as they were to see me. Apparently, Slater and Tawney were watching their little munchkin so they could have a night out to themselves.

"I'm nervous as hell," I admitted.

Raleigh settled her slim fingers on my arm, giving it a gentle squeeze. "Just breathe. I've seen the two of you together, and you're absolutely perfect for

each other. Xavier is madly in love with you. There's no way he'd say no."

I gave her a tense smile. She patted my arm in understanding. Finally, Xavier made his way down to the docks, a grin on his lips. I quickly wrapped my arms around him, sealing my mouth over his.

"Hey," he breathlessly greeted. "Sorry I'm late. One of the new guys didn't show up on time, and I couldn't leave."

I didn't work today due to me having an appointment with my therapist, which was why I'd told Xavier to meet me here when he got off work. It had sucked to be all day without him, especially since we always worked together in the summer during lifeguard season, but the break was good for us, too. It was unhealthy to always be up each other's asses all the time.

I scowled that some fucker had made my man late. "I hope Chief lights into his ass later for it." I ran my eyes over him, my dick plumping a little at how fucking good he looked in a pair of slacks, a white, button-down shirt, and a simple black vest. "Fuck, you look good."

He grinned at me, a light blush staining his cheeks. "You don't look too shabby yourself," he teased.

They finally began to let us on the boat, and I linked our fingers together, leading him up on deck. I leaned against the railings once we found a decent spot, and I drew him into my arms, unable to keep my hands off of him. He didn't mind, easily sinking into my hold, resting his chin on my shoulder as he looked out over the vast ocean behind us.

"This is perfect," he whispered, his hands coming up to wrap around me, sliding along my back. I shivered beneath his touch, closing my eyes for a moment to savor our connection. "Thank you for this." He turned his head and pressed a kiss to my neck.

I sighed softly, my fingers trailing up and down his back. "We never really get to do anything special together, so I thought this might be nice. And we don't have to travel far."

He shook his head. "It really is perfect, Harlow."

I swallowed past the emotion thickening my throat. I only hoped the rest of this evening remained perfect for him, that I didn't freak him out with my marriage proposal.

Here was to hoping.



I WAS SO NERVOUS, I could barely eat anything, though I was forcing myself to put the food in my mouth so I wouldn't worry Xavier. He was having the time of his life, making erotic sounds every time he took a bite of food. My dick was beyond hard behind my zipper, and every time I adjusted how I was sitting, Xavier just sent me a naughty, knowing look.

Fucking tease.

Once our main courses were cleared away, I drew in a deep breath, looking out over the water. Xavier sipped at his wine, and I took that opportunity to get up from my seat and lower myself to one knee. If I didn't do it now, I would lose the courage to do it at all.

The tables around us fell silent when Xavier dropped his glass of wine, spilling it all over the other side of the table and the delicate glass shattering, but he didn't even notice. I chuckled, my chest loosening.

Such a clumsy man.

I slid the ring from my pocket and held it up. It was a simple diamond ring—nothing real flashy or expensive. Just something that showed my love for him and the promise I was making to him tonight.

His eyes filled with tears, his chin wobbling. I cleared my throat, my heart racing so fast in my chest, it hurt.

“Xavier, I know things between us haven't always been smooth. You were my bully in high school, and I only antagonized you every chance I got.” A watery laugh spilled past his lips as he swiped at his cheeks. “Things were no easier when I returned home and we were forced to work together.” I drew in a deep breath, trying to steady myself so I could say what I needed to. “But one day, you saved me from getting plowed down by a bicyclist,

and I felt like I could breathe again. The dark thoughts I'd been running from were suddenly silent." My hands were now shaking, but I refused to stop. I *needed* to get this out.

"You've been helping me heal. Helping me love and trust again. You've given me a safe place to land every day and a warm embrace to sink into. My home is wherever you are, Xavier." I drew in a deep breath. "I want to spend the rest of my life loving you and trying to give you everything you've given me. Will you please marry me?"

"Yes!" he yelled, launching out of his seat. He crashed into me, sending us both toppling to the floor. He straddled my hips and grabbed my face in his hands, peppering kisses all over my cheeks, forehead, nose, and jaw. "Yes. God, yes, I will fucking marry you."

I chuckled and grabbed his hand, slipping the ring on his finger—a perfect fit. Then, I grasped his face in my hands and crashed our lips together. Cheers rang out around us, but no one else mattered but this man, who had just agreed to officially become all mine.

It was the best goddamn feeling in the world.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

West Greene is a romance author that specializes in short, steamy books and erotic shorts.

All your instalove needs can be found in one of her books, whether you're looking for possessive men, men with no morals, spicy FF romance, a boy just needing his Daddy, a twink just needing love, or even the other woman to get her HEA.

West Greene refuses to be stuck in one trope or type of romance. She loves variety, and she's definitely going to share that variety with her readers.



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