



Bear, Otter, & the *Kid*

TJ Klune

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For Mom, Tori, Mo-Mo, and Noah Monkey For Jimmy and Mal
Famyls an awesome thing, isnt it? He didnt come out of my belly, but my
God, Ive made his bones,

because Ive attended to every meal, and how he sleeps, and the fact that
he swims like a fish because I took him to the ocean. Im so proud of all those
things. But he is my biggest pride.

—John Lennon

I shall go the way of the open sea, to the lands I knew before you came, and
the cool ocean breezes shall blow from me the memory of your name. —
Adela Florence Nicolson

Prologue or Where Bear Gets His Feet Wet

T_{HIS} is the way my world ends. Watch:

Bear,

I know this is going to be hard for yu to read, but I hope yull understand. I have to leave, Bear. Tom got a job out of state and Im going with him. Im doing this becuz I think it will be easier on all of us if it is red rather than sed. This is a chance for me to make something for myself. Tom sez there are a lot of jobs where we're going which will be better then here in Seafare. Remember my last job? At the Pizza Shack? Remember how well that went? In case yu can't tell from this just being a letter, I was being sarcastic. It didn't go well at all. (At least we know my future is not in pizza!)

I know yu never liked Tom, but he treats me ok. Yu shoudnt worry about him and me, as we'll be fine. Well, I know yu won't worry about him, but still. Hes stuck around longer then yur father did, and don't even get me started on Ty's dad. At least Tom hasn't hit me yet or anything. He even said that when I save up enouf money, he'll let me get one of those online degrees from University of Phoenix Arizona, or whatever its called. Imagine me, with a college degree!

Speaking of that, I hope that yull get a chance to be a writer like yu want to. I know this kind of messes up yur plans about going to school next year, but why do u need college for that? Yuve been making up stories since you were a little kid n e ways so its not like they could teach yu anything else, right? But that skolarship thing will be there later, right? It's not like yu could never get it again. It just cant be right now becuz I need yu to do something for me.

Tom sez that Ty can't go. He sez that having the Kid around will just "freak" up his concentration. (Ok, he didn't say freak, but yu know what I meant) I know this seems like I am making a bad decision but last nite I had a dream. It was all black around me and there was a flashing light really far away. I felt like I had to walk a long time to reach it. I finally got there and the light was a sign for a motel. Yu know what the motel was called, Bear? It was called the LAST CHANCE MOTEL. Do u see what that means? LAST CHANCE MOTEL. It means it's my last chance! My dream was a message, I

know it, and I think Whoever is watching over us knew I was having a tuff time making this decision and that's why I had the dream.

But Tom does say that Ty can't go. So I am going to leave him here with yu. Yu were always better at taking care of him then me. Remember when I was sick for like a month last year couldn't move, and u took care of Ty becuz we couldn't afford to send him to camp at the YMCA? Yu did a really good job then and I remember thinking yur going to be a good dad some day, not like yur dad. Now that I think about it, yu take care of Ty a lot more then I did anyways like a good brother should and yu were always better at it. That is why I feel ok about leaving him here with yu. I just think it would be better for him if he stayed here. What if something happens to me when Im with Tom? I don't want him to see that.

I got sumthing I printed from the internet for yu. Its called a Power Of Attorney. It means that yu can do stuff for Ty without me. Like doctors and school and stuff. It means yull be in charge I guess. At least thats what I got from it. Denise from downstares told me about it. Yu would normaly have to be there with me to have it notterized, but Denise owes me for that time I gave her some smokes when she couldn't afford to buy more. Her kid is a nottery public or something (do yu really have to go to school to learn how to sine and stamp papers? How hard can that be?) and she will cover for me and notterize it. Yull have to wait for yur birthday but thats real soon. Its my present to yu. I hope yu like it.

I am going to miss yu, so yu know. Yu grew up ok, despite everything. I hope yu don't hate me or n e thing for this, but maybe Ill be back one day if this doesn't work out. Maybe, I don't know. Maybe, I was never meant to be a mom. I see yu sometimes and I think how much better it would have been for yu if yu were never born. But I remember yu as such a happy baby, not like Ty who cried all the time. Yur smile still makes it worth it and I hope yull still smile even after this.

Please make sure Ty gets the note I wrote for him.
I don't know what else to say.

Please don't try looking for me. I don't want Tom to get mad. Mom

P.S. I left a little bit of muneey to help yu out for now. I really

can't give more becuz Tom sez we need to save for our future. Remember, Rent is due at the beginning of the month, along with the other bills. Yu paid those for me n e ways, but what kind of a mom would I be if I didn't remind yu.

Ty,

Yu listen to yur brother and do what he sez, ok? Mommy loves yu!
Mom

T_{HATS} what I found when I came home from work that day. It was a

Saturday night. I didnt know where the Kid was.
She left \$137.50 in an envelope with my name on it.
The next day, I turned eighteen. Three days after that, I graduated high school.

1. Where Bear Sees People Come Home for the Summer

Three Years Later

So, ^{just}to be up front with you, my names not really Bear. Its actually Derrick McKenna, but Ive been Bear since I was like thirteen or fourteen. Its when Ty was trying to say my name as a baby and couldnt say Derrick. It came out all weird, like “Barick,” but once Mom heard that all she could focus on was how it sounded like he called me “Bear.” I guess it was a sort of divine comedy in its own way as I had done something similar to someone else when I was little. But Ill get to that later.

Anyway: Bear. So she started calling me Bear. Of course I hated it at first. There wasnt and still isnt anything *bearish* about me. But she insisted, and anytime I had a friend over or she answered the phone for me or talked to one of my teachers, she made a point of calling me Bear. I was just beginning high school then, too, and you know how that is: anything done as a freshman gets remembered forever. This was all thanks to my mom. The name stuck, she didnt.

Im not trying to sound all maudlin or anything. This isnt that kind of story. This isnt about poor old Bear and how his mom ran out on him, leaving him to raise his younger brother and how his life was totally screwed up by it, but in the end he learns A Very Valuable Lesson about life and shit. Its not going to be like that.

Well, okay, scratch that. I dont know what kind of story this is. I just hope its not going to be saccharine and make you gag or anything. Things like that make me queasy.

But I digress.

I just wanted to be up front with you about my name. I imagine, for some reason, when people hear my name as I get called now, Bear McKenna, that they assume one of two things: that Ill either be a really big, hairy lumberjack with a stern demeanor but a heart of gold or that Im pretentious as all hell. Usually its the first thing, until they see me and blink a few times, trying to associate such a name with what theyre seeing. As for the second part? Think about it: if you met someone for the first time named Bear, wouldnt you

assume they were an exaggerated version of themselves? Yes? No? Well, I guess I don't think like most people. And I don't fight them about it anymore. My name's Bear McKenna.

"Derrick?"

Well, most of the time it is. I look in the rearview mirror and see my little brother, Tyson, staring back at me with an expression on his face that I can't quite identify. Usually, he reserves calling me Derrick for when he is about to ask something serious, like if there is a planet of cows that have farms that milk people, then slaughter them for their tasty cutlets, or why Mom left and didn't come back. He asks a lot of questions.

"What, Ty?"

"Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure, Kid."

"How do you know if you're in love?"

I smile. I try not to think about where this is going. Understanding the Kids' line of logic is an extraordinary exercise in futility. He thinks on a whole different level than the rest of us. Last week I explained to him, at his insistence, where babies came from. He sat with a look of dire contemplation on his face through the entirety of the conversation. When I finished, he'd gotten up and gone outside to play without a word. Later, when I was tucking him into bed, he finally responded: "Bear, why on *earth* would any girl want to push a baby out like that?" I didn't know how to answer him then, as I sometimes don't. Not many people can make me speechless, but Ty manages it on a daily basis.

I look back now at Ty and arch my eyebrow. "Why? You got someone you haven't told me about, Kid?"

He shrugs vaguely. "I dunno. It doesn't necessarily have to be about me, Bear. It's just a question." By the way, my brother is eight going on sixty. Given everything he has gone through in his life, I can't blame him. Most kids his age haven't gone through a quarter of the shit he's been through. But at the same time, how many third graders do you know that are vegetarians by their own decision? I had nothing to do with that, trust me. I like hamburgers with bacon and sausage (and stop grimacing until you try it—it's damn good). But that's what I get for allowing him to watch some documentary on slaughterhouses on TV. He hasn't been the same since.

I stare ahead so I don't rear-end someone on the freeway, but I'm hedging and he knows it. I feel his eyes on the back of my head. I sigh again. "I guess it's

when all those stupid songs on the radio start making sense.” I chance a glimpse in the mirror and see him frowning. “What do you think it is?” When it comes to these esoteric sorts of questions, I always find it better to let him answer. But factual questions about babies and stuff, I make sure I answer for him. Even if I want to pull my hair out while doing so.

Hes quiet for a moment and then says, “I think its when you cant go on another day without the other person. That they make you feel like your stomach is on fire but in a good way.”

“That sounds good to me.”

“Bear?”

“Yeah?”

“Can we stop? I have to pee.”

“Sure, Kid. Were kinda early anyways.”

I see a sign for a rest stop ahead and move off onto the exit. The parking lot is empty and its drizzling outside. I pull into a space in front of the bathrooms, already knowing the routine. Ty sits patiently in the car while I walk into the mens room to make sure its empty. It is. I walk out the door and wave. He gets out of the car and walks up to me.

“Bear, youre going to wait right here, right.” Its not said as a question, but as a command.

“Sure am.”

“Okay, Ill be right back. Make sure you wait right here.”

I nod, knowing that Ill be here just as sure as he knows. Ty refuses to use public restrooms when there is anyone else in them. He always makes me check first. When I give the all-clear, only then will he go in. He doesnt allow me to go in with him, stating very plainly that he is “old enough to know how to work his parts.” But before he does, he makes sure of where Ill be. And I mean in the *exact spot*. If I move a foot or two away from where I said I would be, he notices. I know he understands that Ill never leave him like that, but he still needs those reassurances. Its the same with what time I will pick him up from school or what time Ill get off of work. If Im late, he has sort of a panic attack, where his breathing becomes constricted, and he has thoughts run through his head that he knows arent true. I took him to a doctor at a free clinic who suggested putting him on some kind of anti-anxiety medication that was supposed to be all the rage these days. But Ty told the doctor and me plainly that he didnt want to become “one of *those* kids.” I try not to be late. Its easier.

I can hear him humming while he pees, his sign that hell be a while, so I turn and look out at the rain. Its the end of May, but in Oregon that doesnt matter. It can still be cold and raining whenever it wants to be and theres not a whole lot you can do about it. Especially when you live in Seafare, a small town on the Pacific Ocean, like we do. For anyone never having been to the Oregon coast, the ocean there is nothing like the ocean in California. Its cold and foggy and rainy pretty much all the time. Oh sure, we do get sunny days, but the Pacific Northwest has its reputation for a reason. I hear that a lot of people commit suicide up here. Weirdos.

Were currently making the sixty-mile trek to Portland to pick up my best friend, Creed Thompson, from the airport. I havent seen him since he came home for spring break. Hes a junior at Arizona State, majoring in computer science. Pretty soon hell graduate and go to work for IBM or Google and make a bazillion dollars per year, but as of right now, hes still Creed, the guy Ive known since my first day at Seafare Elementary School in the second grade. We were instantly connected at the hip, maybe just because of how opposite we were. Hes outgoing and can talk to anyone, whereas I dont like most people. His parents are still married (and around and alive). Theyre rich, but not so much that you became distracted by all the stuff they have. Im obviously not rich. So life goes.

Mr. Thompson had had some sort of computer company in Seattle in the late eighties and early nineties and sold off everything before it all went to hell. He then decided he hated living in a big city and hated having a lot of stuff. He sold all the things he didnt want and moved the family to Seafare. I always found it funny how Mr. Thompson seemed to be the only rich person who hated being rich. It still didnt stop him from buying one of the biggest houses in Seafare, where Ive spent a lot of time through the years. The same house where we are having a surprise birthday party for Ty soon, providing I can keep it a secret.

Creeds parents are cool as far as parents go, but Im glad that theyre gone. Not gone-gone but off in some country on some kind of retreat, helping to build homes in Africa or curing leprosy in Sweden, I dont know. I know theyll be gone until November so theres a big empty house for us to use this summer. Itll be nice to get out of the crappy apartment for the next few months.

Dont get me wrong; I have friends. It just so happens the majority of them are at school somewhere else and living their lives, doing whatever it is they do. Most dont come back to Seafare if they can help it. The rest might be

imaginary. Creed comes back a lot, saying that Arizona is actually located on the surface of the sun, not next to California like a map says. But with his parents being gone the majority of the year, he can always come back here, and its like he has his own private vacation home, which is cool if youre into that kind of thing. When I told him this, he just looked at me funny, saying he never thought of it that way. We didnt talk about it anymore.

Its hard to maintain normal friendships when youre the guardian of the smartest eight-year-old in the world. Most couldnt understand why I did what I did. Hell, there are times that I dont understand it, either. The only way I can rationalize it is that a person can do strange things when they dont have any other choice.

The only other person I really care to see is my sort-of girlfriend, Anna Grant. But she lives in Seafare, too, commuting back and forth to the next county to go to the community college there, so its not like I dont get to see her. She was the second person I met after Creed way back in the day. Were together more often than not, but its *not* a lot of the time. Its not a joke: one time we did get back together and broke up five seconds later when I accidentally told her that her nose looked flat from the angle I was at. I didnt mean it as a bad thing; it kind of just popped out of my mouth. She got mad and stormed off. Five seconds. But shes my other best friend, so I generally try not to worry. I find if you worry too much, you spend less time doing other things.

Like standing outside in the rain at a rest stop, waiting for your brother to get done peeing. I turn back toward the door and hear him humming still. I look down at my watch. Its two thirty. Creed needs to be picked up in a half hour, and weve still got a few miles to drive. “Hey, Kid? You good? We gotta get going.”

I hear him stop humming. “Bear, I dont talk to you when youre going to the bathroom,” he says matter-of-factly.

Touché.

A few minutes later he comes out. I make sure Im standing in the exact spot he left me in. I see him give me an appraising look, finding me there. I hold out my hand and he grabs it, and we walk out back into the rain.

“^{THE}he is!” Ty points out excitedly. I see Creed standing at the entrance to one of the terminals. He sees me coming, and Tys waving like mad, and he laughs. Most girls think Creed is “mad crazy hot” (his own words) and I guess, from a male perspective, hes okay-looking. Hes got short blond hair

that kind of does whatever it wants, white even teeth, green eyes, and even Ill admit hes built like a truck. From the looks of it, he has put on more muscle than even the last time I saw him in March. And hes tall, which is the bane of my existence, being only 59” myself. And my hair is dark. And my eyes are brown. And Im pale. And I think for some reason that I still have one of my baby teeth because one tooth is a lot smaller than all the others. I tell Creed the only reason Im his friend is because he is a big, tan rich kid. He says the only reason hes *my* friend is because Im little, white, and I live in the ghetto with my baby teeth. We get along great.

He opens the door and thrusts his bags over the seats to the back, next to Ty. He gets in and grins over at me. He reaches over and puts one arm around my shoulder, pulling me into a hug, and I feel rain water roll onto my cheek. He pats my back with the requisite three-pat man-hug and pulls away. “Whats up, dude? Hows coastal life?”

I smile and shrug. “Same as when I talked to you last. I think you would know if anything major was going on.”

He grins again and looks over his shoulder into the backseat and quickly rubs his hands over his head, spraying water all over me and Ty, who laughs out a mock protest. “Whats up, Kid? Bear treating you okay, or do I need to take him down a few pegs for you?”

Ty puts his hand to his chin in concentration and thinks for a moment. Then, “Maybe just one peg. He wouldnt let me get that new documentary about PETA from the video store.”

“That was a month ago!” I protest, knowing whats coming. Ty glares at me. “I remember things.”

Creed laughs. “One peg it is,” he says and punches me on the shoulder.

Yeah, hes definitely put on more muscle.

“Bastard,” I growl, rubbing my arm. “You should have seen this movie. It was all about how to become an ecoterrorist and fight against the system. If the Kid had gotten it, he probably would be blowing up some celebrity for wearing fur right now.”

“Eh, what can you do?” Creed says. “At least it wasnt like last time when he said three pegs for not getting him the right brand of soy milk.” How could I forget? I had a bruise on my arm for a month.

Ty speaks for me. “He gets me the right kind now. And, Bear, I cant believe you said it was about how to „fight against the system. I guess its disheartening for any child to learn their big brother is still living in the

Reagan years.”

I dont even know what that means.

AN HOUR later, were still on the freeway, traffic having backed up, and its raining harder. Creeds been telling us whats been going on in Arizona, more for Tys benefit than mine as I speak to Creed a few times a week. Ty tells him about the new teacher he had at school who hes had to correct a few times when the teacher had been wrong in class, and about how I had to go in for a “Brother-Teacher” conference (he refuses to call it parentteacher). He makes a face as he tells Creed about how Mr. Epsom had called Benjamin Franklin a fine president. Creed looks over at me quickly, and I nod, and Creed turns back in horror to Ty, asking how anyone could get that mixed up.

“I know!” Ty mutters darkly. “There are apparently no standards to teach the third grade. And we dont get out of school for another month.” Ten minutes later, Tys talked out and asleep, his head resting on Creeds bags. Looking back over his shoulder to make sure the Kid is actually asleep, Creed then turns to me and says quietly, “I thought Benjamin Franklin was a president.”

“I thought he was too! I had to look it up later just to make sure. Apparently he didnt do a lot of things I thought he did.”

“Hes on money though, right?” Creed asks.

“Yeah, he is. Howd he do that if he wasnt president?”

“He probably had a big dick.”

I grin. “Like the bigger it was, the higher the bill you would be on or something?”

“Yeah. Poor George,” Creed says, laughing. “Of course, I would be on the million-dollar bill.”

“They dont make a million-dollar bill.”

“Well, yeah. They havent seen how big my dick is.” We both laugh.

Then he quiets down and looks over at me. “Its good to see you, Bear. Thanks for coming to pick me up.”

I shrug. “Sure. Its not every day you come back, so its no big deal.

How were finals?” I ask, trying to prolong the conversation from where itll inevitably go.

He groans and covers his face. “A nightmare. I dont think theyre going to let me go back next semester.”

“Liar.”

He grins. “Youre right. Bear, I could do this crap in my sleep. Im getting so bored being in school. Im doing this stupid internship right now, and its literally the most idiotic thing Ive ever done. Apparently „intern means „glorified errand boy.” He shakes his head. “The recommendation will be good when I graduate, though. Speaking of, I know its a year away, but make sure you know you and the Kid need to be in Phoenix for graduation.”

I nod. “Itll give me enough time to start saving up some money. We should be able to swing it, at least for a couple of days.” *Goddamn it! Why’d I have to—*

“Bear, if youd just let me—” Creed begins, going into that same old dance that Ive long memorized the steps to.

I cut him off. “Dont start that again. You know that if I needed help, Id ask. Its not that Im so full of pride that I dont know to ask if I needed to.” He looks out the window. “I know that you would make sure Tys covered but you wouldnt ask help for yourself.”

I dont respond because I know its true, and anything said to the contrary would sound hollow to both of us.

Creed turns back to me. “Cmon, Bear. You know I worry about you and the Kid. Its my right as your best friend and job as being Uncle Creed.”

“I know,” I say irritably. “But we are actually doing okay right now. Im almost all caught up with the bills. Were not behind on rent like we were last year. The only things I am really worried about right now is what to do about the Kids school next year and”—I look back to make sure Ty is still asleep—“his birthday party.”

“Brother-Teacher Conference?”

“Brother-Teacher Conference. Apparently hes a „disruption in class, but even the teacher and principal think its because he is too smart for the material. They want to move him up to fifth grade next year, but I dont know.”

Creed whistles. “Skipping a grade? How the hell did he get so smart?”

He grins and lightly punches me on the shoulder. “We know its nothing *you* did.”

I punch him back, careful not to swerve the car and end up in a ditch.

“Youre telling me? I know that already. I just wonder if he needs the *disruption* of skipping a grade. I dont know if that would be good for him or not.” And I really believe that. I dont know if its a blessing or a curse

that Mom chose to leave me with the goddamn smartest kid on the planet. “Whatever I decide, they want an answer two weeks before the new school year begins, to fit him into a classroom.”

“And theyre not giving you any more shit over the power of attorney?” he asks.

I shake my head. “Nah. Not as much as they did at first. But theyve been dealing with me since Ty was in kindergarten. You know I was at these meetings more than my mom ever was. The only thing that really changed is that her say-so really wasnt needed anymore.” This had terrified me at first, of course, on top of everything else—that I had the final say over anything and everything Tyson. Even if Id been the one to attend these teacher conferences and doctors appointments when our mom had still been around, shed usually still signed off on everything. I remember being afraid that everything I did was going to be wrong and that there’d be no one there to correct my mistakes. Looking back, I dont really know how we survived. Sheer force of will, perhaps.

Creed looks back at Ty and then at me. “Dude, if youd have told me three years ago that wed be having this conversation, I would have said you were high.”

“I know. Its crazy, right?”

He laughs. “Full-on Papa-Bear mode.” He looks out the window as we pull into the Seafare city limits. “Ah, home sweet home. Did you know when I left Phoenix it was 113 degrees outside?”

I make a face. I dont understand how anyone can live in that kind of weather. The Kid and I went to visit Creed over their holiday break a couple of years ago. It was hot on Christmas Eve, and we went swimming at this barbecue we went to. I swore I got skin cancer for the week we were there. The Kid told me I was a drama queen. Arizona is weird. Give me the ocean and cold anytime.

I turn down Seaway Avenue, which leads to the Pinecrest Coast side of town, where Creeds house is at. And before this goes any further, let me repeat something, just so were clear: Creeds family is rich, Im not. Thats just the way it is. Im not some kind of wrong-side-of-the-tracks cliché that needs to be saved from his life of poverty. Im not fighting those that oppress me in some all-out movie-of-the-week kind of way. These are just the facts of life, and it is what it is and blah, blah, blah. Im doing okay. We’re doing okay. Ive learned in my short time here on Earth that things

could *always* be worse.

Creed is saying something about some girl he boned or wants to bone or got halfway to boning when we turn onto his street, and his words cut off. I look over at him and see him staring at the window.

“What?”

“Whose car is in my driveway?”

I look further down the street and indeed see an older Jeep Cherokee sitting in front of Creeds four-car garage. Its black and missing a hubcap on one of the tires. I havent seen it before, and I dont think it belongs to his parents. “Do you think we should stop?”

He laughs. “Where else we gonna go? If its someone breaking in, I need to at least make sure theyre not taking any of *my* stuff.” We get closer to the house, close enough to see no one in the Jeep and to see the front door is closed and not in splinters like my overactive mind thought it would be.

“Park next to it,” he says, pointing to a spot in the driveway. “Ill go in. You stay out here with the Kid and keep your window down, and Ill shout for you if I need help.”

I roll my eyes. “Thats sounds like a great plan. Ill make sure to come running. Together, well be able to take em down with all the weapons I keep in my car. Way to think that one out.”

Creed doesnt say anything as he opens his door and gets out into the rain. I see him look through the windows on the garage door, but he doesnt see anything that would make him run back to the car. I reach for my cell phone and dial 911 and hold my hand over the send button, just to be safe. I look in the rearview mirror and see that Tys still sleeping on Creeds bags. Creed walks up to the front door and opens it with his keys and pushes it open, calling out with deepened voice and a stuck-out chest, “Hello?” I snort and accidentally dial 911. I look at my phone in horror and hang up, hoping it didnt go through because those people can track you *anywhere*. I look back up in time for Creed to buckle over, laughing.

“No way!” he yells into the house and turns back to walk out to the car where I sit, still unsure if its a robber or if 911 is going to call me back. “Who is it?” I demand as he opens the door.

Creed grins at the Kid asleep on his bags and then looks back at me, his eyes dancing. “Dude, its Otter. My big bro came home.”

2. Where Bear Attempts to Explain Some Things

O_{KAY}, so I know what youre thinking: first Bear, now a guy named Otter? I can explain that one too.

Remember when I told you how Ty is the reason that my mom and everyone else in the world started calling me Bear? I guess it was some kind of cosmic revenge for what I did to Creeds big brother. When I first met Creed at the tender age of eight, I was infinitely shyer than I am now. Im okay now with meeting new people. Either that or I just ignore them. But back then, I was a nightmare when it came to strangers. I was over at Creeds house for the first time to play and spend the night. My mom had some new boyfriend that was taking up all of her time (oh, I know, poor me, right?) and the Kid was still a few years away. So when my mom found out I had made a new friend, I was instantly pawned off on this family who could have taken one look at me and closed the door. But they didnt, and after a while, it got to be where Creeds mom would recognize my voice when I called on the phone, and I would have dinner at their house more often than my own. Then Ty came and that got all curbed for a while so I could stay home and help my mom.

The first time I went over to Creeds house, I was a nervous wreck, and it all had to do with this unseen entity, this creature known as a *big brother*. Creed had told me before that he was sixteen and a jerk but that he would leave us alone if we left him alone. Naturally, that terrified the hell out of me. I imagined this great hulking teenager who would tear me apart if I even looked at him weird, and I suddenly didnt want to go. I begged my mom, but she told me that Bill or Frank or John or Bob or whatever other onesyllable name she was dating at the time was going to take her somewhere fancy and how she deserved it and didnt I think she deserved it? And of course not another word was spoken on the matter, and two hours later I found myself on the Thompsons front porch with a Transformers overnight bag that my mom had purchased at a garage sale for the occasion. I rang the doorbell, wondering how a rich persons doorbell would sound and was in the middle of being surprised that it sounded like ours when the door opened.

“Where you?” the older boy said with a scowl, looking at me over his Gameboy. The first thing I thought was how impressed I was that he had a Gameboy. You remember those things with the foul green screen that reduced every game to Gerber Mashed Peas? I always wanted one, but my mom said it was better to have a roof over our head. I was never one to try and argue with that kind of logic.

The second thing I remember was that Creed had said his brother could be a jerk and of course that meant he was capable of murder and that he would not hesitate to murder *me*. So I squeaked out my name, asking if Creed was home. He yelled for Creed over his shoulder and walked away. I didn't know if I should follow him or stay where I was. My legs wouldn't move, so I decided it was best if I stayed outside. Creed came to the door and grabbed my arm and pulled me in. I went in and said hi to his parents, who I'd met a couple of times before. Creed led me to his room so I could put my stuff down. We walked past another door whose hinges were about to be blown off by music pulsating deep from within that had a sign with almost illegible handwriting. And I will swear to God till the day I die that it said *KEEP OUT OF OTTER'S ROOM*.

Now, I didn't know the name of Creed's older brother when I arrived, and I puzzled all the way to Creed's room on why his brother was named Otter. I asked him this quietly in his room after I'd made sure no one could hear me as I didn't want to incur the wrath of someone somewhere. I remember Creed laughing hysterically, to the point where he was crying. You know where someone finds something so funny that you just don't get the humor in it, but they are laughing so hard that you eventually start laughing too? Yeah, it was one of those kinds of things. There we were, laughing our asses off, with one of us not understanding what was so funny. Between hitching breaths and snot hanging out of his nose, Creed finally told him that his brother's name was Oliver.

Everything was going good until Creed brought it up while all of us were at dinner.

I wished at that point, as I had never wished before, that I could disappear, become invisible, drop down dead, *anything* to get away from my sheer stupidity. Of course, I naturally assumed they were all laughing at me. I could feel my face on fire as I tried to think of something funny I'd seen to keep the tears from spilling over. Eventually, finally, the conversation switched over to something else. I kept stealing glances over at Oliver, wondering how mad

he was at me and how he was going to get his revenge. One time he caught me looking and gave me a crooked grin. His eyes flashed.

I looked away.

The next time I went over to the Thompson house, everyone called him Otter.

I ^{REACH} back and shake the Kid a little bit, trying to wake him. He doesn't like to wake up in strange places, so this is gentle work. Eventually he opens his eyes and hunts around until he finds me and visibly relaxes.

"What's going on, Bear?" he asks, yawning.

"We're at Creed's house. Remember how I said we were going to hang out here tonight? Is that still okay? If we stay here for a while?" I had actually planned on crashing here tonight, but now that Otter's here I don't want to. Long story.

The Kid stretches in the seat and nods. "Do you think Creed still has the History Channel on his TV?"

I try to hide my smile but don't do very well. "I'm sure he does. Don't you want to watch cartoons or something, though?" He looks at me like I'm crazy. I sigh and remind myself once again how normal he isn't and how okay that is. I hesitate with my next words, but only for a moment. "Guess what else, Kid? Otter's here too."

The Kid pauses for a moment, thinking. "It's been a while," he finally says succinctly. He quickly unbuckles his seat belt and steps out into the rain. I zip up his coat, noticing how small it is on him now, wondering if I need to go get him a new one. I try and think if he has any other coat in the closet at home, but I can't remember. But that's all right. For now. For now, he seems to be okay.

"Bear, you coming inside or what?" Creed asks from the doorway. I startle, realizing that Ty has already run inside, and I'm standing in the driveway getting soaked. I grin sheepishly and rub my hands through my hair.

As I enter the house, I hear Ty yelling for Otter as he runs up the stairs. Creed rolls his eyes at me. "I guess I've been replaced already."

"Don't feel too bad," I say. "The Kid thinks you're cool, but 'Otter rocks!' My voice rises to the octave of the Kid.

"Story of my life," he mutters.

"So, why is he here?" I ask, trying to sound casual, but Creed doesn't hear me.

I follow him into the kitchen, where I hear Otter thumping back down the stairs and Ty already babbling away at him. I see them pass by the aquarium near the bottom of the stairs, and I notice Ty already resting on Otter's back,

his arms thrown companionably around his neck as he giggles into his ear. Otter has the same lopsided grin on his face that he always has. I remember when he used to be able to carry me like that. Hes a bit shorter than Creed but more muscular than he is. Everything else, from the closely cropped blond hair to the green eyes is the same. Of course hes older than Creed and I, twenty-nine years old to our just-turned twenty-one. He hasnt really changed much over the years. I find myself uncharacteristically fascinated by the veins that bulge out on his massive arms, the way his back looks like it goes on for miles under the shirt he wears. His gigantic hands, the crinkles around his eyes that form when he smiles. Theres something there, in the back of my mind, but I cant look at it now and berate myself quietly for noticing these things about him. About myself. What the hell do I care?

Otter sets down the Kid on the countertop in the kitchen, still giving Ty his full attention. Tys telling him some story involving the evils of ham production and looks down for a moment. Thats when Otter glances up over Tys head just for an instant and searches for me. His eyes find mine, and Otter grins the Otter grin before quickly diverting his attention back to the Kid. He knows as well as anybody that when Ty is talking to you about something as important as ham processing, you pay attention like its the last thing youll ever hear. I try not to notice how my step stutters when he looks away.

I walk into the kitchen. Creed grabs beer out of the fridge and offers one to me, which I take. He throws one to Otter who catches it deftly with one hand while never tearing his eyes away from Ty. Ty pauses in a sentence, and then Creed interjects, “Kid, you want a beer?”

Tys eyes widen and then narrow suspiciously. “What if I say yes?” Creed shrugs. “Then Id tell you youd have to ask Papa Bear.”

The Kid glances sideways at me then goes back to Creed. “Bear and I already talked about it, and he thinks Im old enough.”

I snort. “Like hell we did! You little liar.”

The Kid looks back at Otter, who is struggling to keep a straight face. “You believe me, right, Otter?” he asks, making his voice sound as if he

were some poor orphan boy asking for a meal. Otter cant contain it and bursts out laughing, a loud bellowing sound that echoes throughout the tiled kitchen. Ty crosses his arms and scowls.

Otter sobers up for a moment, looking down at the little boy in front of him. “How about this,” he says. Ty instantly perks to attention. “How about I

give you a sip of my beer and *just a sip*, and then I go get you some soy ice cream?”

Soy ice cream? I should have thought of that.

Ty looks at Otter for a moment to make sure hes not joking and then looks at me, eyes pleading. I pretend to mull it over for a moment while Otter, Creed, and the Kid begin making pitiful noises, begging, just begging. I throw my hands up in the air, and Ty knows hes got me beat.

Otter picks up his beer bottle and hands it over to Ty, saying, “You can sip until I count to three, and then youre done, okay?” Ty nods and lifts the bottle to his lips. “One... two... three, and youre done.” He takes the bottle away from Ty, who sits there a moment before letting out a great burp. We all laugh, and Otter gives a high-five to the Kid, who is grinning, knowing hes one of the boys.

Otter picks Ty easily off the counter and sets him on the ground, asking him first in his gruffest voice if he is too drunk to walk and did he know that was against the law? Ty says he knows it was against the law, but he was peer-pressured into it, just like Creed pressured me to drink the first time. Creed rolls his eyes and leans over and whispers to me, “So, thats what you told him? Damn liar.”

“What can I say?” I whisper back. “I was young and impressionable, and you coerced me.” Creed snorts on his beer, spilling it onto the ground. He searches around for a towel while cursing my name. While smirking at Creed, I feel a strong arm drop onto my shoulder. I look over and see Otter standing next to me, crooked grin and all. His teeth are big and white.

“Hi, Bear,” Otter says. Theres determination in his eyes.

“Hi, Otter,” I say, looking back at him, fighting against the urge to throw his arm off of me.

For a moment he looks like hes about to speak but something must cross his mind, changing it, and he takes it back. He gives me a one-armed hug and then steps back to stand in front of me, looking down at the beer in his hand. I wonder what just happened and what he was going to say. I wonder a lot of things, but its all batted down by the sound of rain on the roof. I look down at Creed, but his attention is still focused on the spilled beer, so he didnt see anything. Not that there would have been anything to see. I look back up to Otter and am trying to make out the mess that is my mind when he says, “So, whats the word, Papa Bear?”

I shrug. “Same, I guess. Whats new with you? I havent seen you since

what, the Christmas before last?" I say this last bit coldly, as we both know damn well when the last time I saw him was.

Hes about to speak again, but this time is interrupted by Creed. "Yeah, whats up, Otter? Not that I mind at all, but how come youre here? What, San Diego getting to be too much for you?"

Otter shrugs, and I dont think hes going to answer when he says, "Felt like I needed a change of scenery for a while." He takes another sip of his beer and doesnt speak further, and it drives me fucking crazy.

Hed graduated from the University of Oregon in Eugene and had stayed in Seafare for a while. After my mom left, some shit went down, and then Otter was gone too. I have only seen him once in the last three years. I know he works for some kind of photography agency down there where his work is apparently hot shit. The house Im in right now is full of his pictures, his moms equivalent of hanging coloring pages and good test scores on the fridge.

"Uh-huh," Creed says. "Are you sure its not troubles with your boy—" "Uncle Creed?" The Kid calls out from the living room, interrupting

Creed, but not before I see the warning look that Otter shoots him. Creed smirks and yells back "Whats up, Kid?"

"Did Otter go get my soy ice cream yet?"

Otter laughs. "Is that your way of telling me I need to go get it right now for you?"

"Yes. I was trying not to be rude, but I would like ice cream for when my show comes on."

"What show is that?" I ask, trying to remember if hed told me. "Its a show about the history of slaughterhouses in the 1920s," he calls back.

"Oh, Jesus Christ," I mutter. Theres nothing quite like the buzzkill of seeing how hamburger gets made. And nothing quite so boring as the history behind it. I turn to apologize to Creed and Otter, but Creed stops me, as he knows where Im going.

"Shut up, Bear, and let the Kid do what he wants." He finishes off his beer and reaches in to grab another one, saying, "Besides, I want to watch it, too, and see how long it takes for me to get drunk enough to see if it gets funny. Why dont you go with him?" he asks me. "Give Ty some Uncle Creed time and you some time off."

I can think of at least four hundred reasons why thats a bad idea and look at Otter who is scouting around for his keys. "Do you want me to go?" I ask.

The moment I say the words, I regret them. My mouth tends to move on its own.

He looks surprised but readily agrees. I tell him Ill be right back, and I go to find the Kid.

I walk through the hall, pausing to look every now and then at the pictures on the walls. Theres one from, like, fifteen years ago of Creed, Otter, and their parents. There are separate ones of Creed and Otter and other family: grandparents, aunts, uncles. It used to weird me out seeing these pictures. We didnt have anything like that hanging in our house. My mom said that when I was seven, she took me with her and had our pictures taken “professionally,” I remember her saying proudly. But when I asked her where the pictures were, she said she couldnt remember.

I get to another picture in the hallway and stop. Its black and white, taken when me and Creed were fifteen years old. Otter had taken it, showing us jumping on a giant trampoline that they used to have in the backyard. Otter had caught us mid-jump, our longer hair frenzied about our faces, our shirts bunched slightly up around our stomachs, revealing white lines of skin. I look at myself then and realize how different I look now. How different things are now.

I was too skinny all through high school, until finally I got sick of it and started working out. Im nowhere near as bulked up as Creed is, but its a lot better than where I started. My face isnt tragic and my skin is clear. I dont have a tan, but then most people that live here dont. I have brown eyes and black hair that needs to be cut. I have a white scar on my forehead near my right eyebrow where Creed had accidentally hit me with an aluminum bat when I was thirteen years old. That took four stitches, and my mom sat with me in the emergency room, saying I should see if I could get any Vicodin. I did and gave it to her.

Ive never been one to be concerned with looks or vanity (for the most part). To be honest, I dont have the time. I dont have fancy clothes or expensive haircuts and dont really see the need for it. Im more worried about keeping a roof over our head and buying Tyson new shoes almost every other week. I dont know how its possible for a nine-year-old to go through so many pairs of damn shoes. So, with all that, Ive learned its significantly easier to be humble when youre forced to do it. You can consider that a life lesson from me to you. Youre welcome.

I take a deep breath and look back at the picture, a moment caught from what

feels like a lifetime ago.

I go out to the living room and see the Kid reclined out on the sofa, head on a pillow, eyes opened wide as he watches yet another show that looks like it belongs in the original *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. “Kid,” I grumble at him, “I dont know how you dont have nightmares from this. This creeps *me* out.” “Maybe you just feel guilty about what you eat,” he deadpans, never raising his eyes to look at me.

“You little punk,” I growl, leaning down and tickling him right under his ribs where I know he gets it the worst. My mom and I are the same way. He tries not to laugh but is soon howling at me, “Bear, Bear!” trying to wiggle this way and that. I stop, and he looks up at me with such a look that for a moment I am blinded by my love for this kid, my Kid, that it feels like my breath gets knocked out of me. I kiss the top of his head, and he says, “Ah, gross!” but thats okay.

“You gonna be okay here with Creed for a little bit while Otter and I go get your ice cream?” I ask when Ive recovered myself a bit. His eyes steal away from the TV and lock onto mine. “Youre going to come back, though, right?”

I smile reassuringly and ruffle his hair where I kissed him a moment ago. “You got it, Kid. I shouldnt be gone long at all. It should only take a little bit, but to be on the safe side, give me an hour, okay?” He looks at his watch and notes the time, then nods. I do, too, seeing its almost seven. “You have your cell phone with you?” I ask. He nods again and pulls it out of his pocket. “Alright, then. Ill be back in a little bit, but call me if you need to.” He nods again, already back into his show. I touch his head again and walk back toward the kitchen.

It may or may not be weird to you that he has a cell phone. It seems like a lot of kids his age do these days. Its not really something I can afford right now, but I make do. I learned early on after Mom left that if he had his own way to reach me, he felt better about being apart from me. He never uses the cell phone to call anyone else, and aside from Creed, Anna, Mrs. Paquinn (our next-door neighbor, more on her later), and occasionally Otter, no one else calls him on that phone. If someone needs to reach him, they do so through me.

Im about to reenter the kitchen when I hear hushed voices, and I pause, immediately feeling guilty for eavesdropping. But I listen anyway. Theyre talking about me, so I figure Ive got the right to hear what they say.

“What were you thinking, saying something like that to him?” Otter hissed.

“What the fuck are you talking about, Otter?” Creed sounds slightly amused and slightly pissed off all at the same time, which he has a great talent for. “He already knows. I told him a while ago. Its not a big deal. He doesnt care.”

“Im not talking about that! I dont care who the hell knows!” Otter sounds upset, and my breath catches in my chest, not wanting him to say anything further. But he does anyways. “Its not about *that*! Jesus, Creed! If you only knew....” Shut up, Otter! *Shut up!* “Besides, if I wanted him to know about *anything*, I would have said something myself. Stay out of it!”

But Creed pushes on: “So thats really why youre back, isnt it? It didnt work out between you and whats-his-name?”

“Creed, I swear to Christ, just drop it! I dont want to talk about this right now!” I hear someone slam their beer bottle onto the countertop, and I assume its Otter.

“Chill, big bro. Like I said, Bear doesnt give a damn one way or the other.”
Oh, Creed.

Silence falls in the kitchen, and I realize Im still holding my breath. I let it out slowly, hating the way it sounds ragged. But that was closer than I ever wanted to hear it said out loud. *It’s not about that... if you only knew!* His words ring in my ears, and I feel lightheaded. Okay. There *might* be something else that I should tell you—

“What are you doing, Bear?” the Kid says loudly from somewhere behind me. I jerk a little bit to the right, hitting my head against the wall. It hits a picture, and a second later I hear it shatter on the floor. *Goddammit, Kid!* I think angrily, knowing I am more upset with myself than with him. I look over at Ty, standing in the hallway, hands in his pockets, a big *O* expression on his lips. I mutter something incoherently and bend down to pick up the glass before he steps on it. Creed comes out of the kitchen, and I can feel his smirk on my hot skin.

“Im sorry,” I say through gritted teeth.

“What the fuck?” he says lightly. “No need to be all ghetto in my nice house.”

I bark out a harsh laugh. I look down at the picture and see its another one that Otter had taken. It shows Creed and his mom at our high school graduation. I am off to the side somewhere, out of sight, holding Tys hand and the sign he and Mrs. Thompson had made for me, saying “*Yay Bear!*”

The picture captures Creed at a perfect moment of wild youth, diploma in one hand, his other around his mom. There's a smile on his face so big you can almost count all of his perfect white teeth. Well, you could have before it had fallen on the ground, tearing right across his face. *Shit!* I think, feeling my face get redder. Before I can say anything further, Otter is hunkered down beside me, picking up shards of glass.

"Otter, I suck. I'm sorry," I whisper, wondering why I feel so goddamn bad.

I feel him shrug as his arm is touching mine. "It's just a picture," he says. "And it's not even very good. Anyone with a camera can take photos and say they're a photographer." He sighs, and I can feel the bitterness coming off him in waves, and I wonder if he is just saying those things for my benefit. I wonder if he is really as pissed off at me as I am at him. I wonder why he's really here.

I wonder a lot of things.

"Bear, just leave it," Creed says, towering over me. "Me and the Kid can pick it up. His show is on, and Otter owes him ice cream."

"Soy ice cream," Ty says, making sure we haven't forgotten.

"That's right!" Creed says, stepping around me and picking up Ty to throw him over his shoulder. Ty laughs in the way that only kids can as Creed carries him back to the living room.

Otter puts the glass on top of the picture, causing Creed and his mom to look all distorted and broken. He holds out his hand to help me up. I look at it for a moment.

"You ready?" he asks.

What a loaded question.

W_{ERE} in his car, after stopping at three gas stations, none of which carry

soy ice cream. Big surprise, right? Otter suggests we go to the grocery store where I work, which is almost on the other side of town. It seems kind of weird because there's another store on the way that would probably have the gross stuff my brother eats, but I don't say anything. It's nice to get away for a little bit.

I know how that sounds, okay? I know that I'm in a kind of fucked-up situation with Ty and all, and I'm doing my best but sometimes I just want to get *away*. I feel guilty about it, kind of like how I am feeling now, but every

now and then, the sheer joy of it outweighs the guilt. I wonder, not for the first time, if this is how my mom felt. Is this what she was thinking when she decided to sit down and write those letters? That undeniable sense of freedom that seems to loom up out of nowhere? I can see how easy it would be to fall to it, to just get in the car and drive and drive and drive until everything around you is unfamiliar and nobody knows who you are and what you've just done. To start over and become anyone you want to be. Whose going to know the difference?

But then, reality sets in.

I'm nothing like her. I've learned how to squash those thoughts quicker than they can take root. If I were to fall prey to it, like she did, then how am I any better than her? After she left, it took me a long time to be where I am at right now. I have a responsibility and not just to myself. What the hell would happen to Ty if he woke up one day and found me gone? I sometimes lay awake at night, these things floating around my head. I see him running from room to room, calling out my name, "*Bear, Bear, Bear!*" I see him picking up his cell phone with his little hands and calling me, only to find my number has been disconnected. What would he do then? I know for a *fact* he would never trust anybody ever again. He has a hard enough time doing it now. That's about the time I always realize I could never do that, not to him, not to anyone. I am not my mom. I am not my mom. I have to be a good father—

Shit.

Brother.

I meant brother.

Fuck. Not again.

I stare out the window. It's still raining.

"You cool?" Otter asks me as he shuts his door. I feel my clothes getting wet again, clinging against my skin. My nipples get hard and I blush. I fold my arms over my chest and nod to Otter and start walking inside. I hear him rush to catch up with me, and then he falls into step beside me.

The automatic doors *whoosh* open and processed air washes over my skin, chilling it as goose flesh moves in. As soon as we get through the doorway, I hear my name. I look up and see Anna standing at a cash register, the magazine in her hand caught in mid-page turning. I smile weakly.

So Anna. And the grocery store.

Lets go with the grocery store first

It's where I've been working since I was sixteen. As soon as I was old enough,

my mom said I needed to get a job to help out with the bills. Being sixteen and living in Seafare doesn't give you a whole lot of options. To be honest, being any age in Seafare doesn't give you a whole lot of options. It was either become a bagger or a busboy. Since my mom already worked at a restaurant at the time, I didn't want to take the chance of having to work with her all the time, so I chose bagger. Now I'm a lead cashier. And before you all grow wide-eyed with amazement over my rags-to-riches story, it's actually not that bad. I pretty much get to stand at the front desk and tell all the other cashiers what to do and when to go on break, stuff like that. It's kind of like being a manager without actually getting paid to be one. Oh, and the manager gets to sit in an office, not at the front desk. Okay, so it's not really like being a manager at all, but it could be worse, right? I could be working McDonalds and hearing the Kid mumble each night I came home that I smelled like bovine genocide. And before you think I'm being overly dramatic, I once worked the meat counter and that's exactly what he said to me. I requested never to be put there again.

So it's not so bad, okay? I've been here long enough that I get to work pretty much whenever I want, which is good, especially working days so I can be done by the time that Ty gets done with school. And they allowed me to put Ty on the health insurance they offer after you've been here three years. They didn't have to do that. I don't like to think about what I'd do because the Kid gets a cold every other minute or so. So see? Things could be worse. A lot worse.

Now Anna.

I told you before how she's my sort-of girlfriend. Do you remember? Now's one of the times when she sort of is, and I feel guilty for a moment

because I told her that I was going to call her as soon as I got to Creeds house. But hey, I can say I wanted to just see her in person and everything works out. She'll see right through me, though, she always does.

"Hey," she says, smiling at me as I walk up to her.

"Hey, yourself," I say back, standing in front of her register like a customer. She leans over to kiss me, and I turn my face lightly, feeling her lips graze my cheek. She pulls back and looks at me funny.

I jerk my head to the side in a sort of nod. "Look whos here."

She looks over my shoulder, and I see her face light up. "Otter!" She laughs and bounds around the register. I turn to watch her go and see Otter

still standing at the door where we walked in. Funny, I thought he was

next to me. She jumps into his arms, wrapping her legs around his waist, and I hear him say, “Oof.”

So, yeah. Anna. I think I told you that she was the second person I met after Creed. She was in the same second-grade class as us, so it was inevitable that we would at least become friends. But it turned out to be much more than that. Anna is the only girlfriend I have ever had, the only girl I have ever kissed. We had sex, the first time for both of us, the summer between eighth and ninth grade, in the guest house that sits behind Creeds house. Shes been my first everything, aside from having the honor of being my first best friend, as that goes to Creed. First love, first heartache, first (and only) proposal of marriage. Yeah, yeah, yeah, I know. But come on, we were ten! And she proposed to *me*, right after our first kiss. And it wasnt even really proposing, it was more of a “Derrick McKenna, I am only going to kiss you if you say that we are getting married when were adults!” Whats a ten-year-old boy to do? I said yes, and she kissed me lightly on the lips, the touch of a feather. I remember turning red enough to light the world on fire. That sealed the deal.

Except for the times when shes sort of not my girlfriend.

Were way too much alike to ever get along all the time. I swear to Christ when we fight, its about the stupidest shit. She thinks shes right. I *know* Im right, blah blah blah, and it always ends with her flipping her long brown hair, her dark eyes flashing, muttering under her breath and sounding so much like me that its hilarious. And thats always the worst time to laugh, so naturally thats when I laugh. Of course, this pisses her off even more—which pisses *me* off—and it always ends with one of us stalking away, licking our wounds. I love her too damn much, though, and I know she feels the same and a couple of days later one of us will pick up the phone and call the other, and things will be good for a while.

And I do mean that. I love her. Anna was there for me growing up, listening to me bitch about how my mom was fucked up. She was there for me, making me talk to new people, telling me that the worst thing a person can do is not make new friends. She was there for me when I found out Ty was on the way (trust me, I wasnt very happy about that at the time). She was there for me when I stumbled into her house after reading my moms letter, tears of rage blinding me, clenching and unclenching my fists. She has seen the good, the bad, and everything in between that makes me who I am. Dont get me wrong: Creed was there through a lot of that, too, but Anna gets me in

a way that he cant. Its not his fault or anyone elses. It just is.

It also helps that she worships the ground Ty walks on. Trust me, it could have been so much easier for her to walk away and not look back like Mom did. But she didnt, and you have to admit, that takes *balls*. Annas one of the few people that Ty trusts and has no problem letting her watch him if I need to pick up a couple of extra shifts at the store. Shes the only one who pretends to get his whole vegetarian phase (and I know its just a phase; no brother of mine is going to eat like that forever). She has been there for him better than any woman ever was to him, and I think he needs that every now and then. He cant look up to just me for the rest of his life, right?

Otter sets her down and leans over to whisper something in her ear. She laughs and slaps his shoulder, and I hear her say “Of course Im still watching out for him! Who else is going to call him on his bullshit?” They both look back at me, and Anna sticks out her tongue. I flash mine back. Otter rolls his eyes and mumbles something about “kids these days.” They walk back over to the register where I still stand.

“Wheres the Kid?” she asks me.

“Watching something gross with Creed,” I say.

She smiles sympathetically. “That show on killing cows?” “Yeah. Howd you know?”

“He told me about it last week when I was babysitting him.” Anna looks over at Otter and whispers conspiratorially, “He didnt want me to tell Bear because he said Bear would be too scared to watch it.” I scowl as Otter laughs. Just because apparently nobody *I* know is normal like me.

“So, Otter, what brings you back home? Getting too famous for California already?” she asks him.

He shrugs nonchalantly. “Just felt like I needed to come home for a little bit, I guess. Hey, wheres the soy ice cream? I promised the Kid some after he drank my beer.” Anna points toward the end of the store. “Ill be right back,” he says, walking away.

Anna looks after him for a moment then turns to me. She leans forward a little bit, as if we are going to be overheard. “So whats going on with him?”

“I dont know. Why would I know?”

“He didnt tell you why he came back home? He never just comes back to Seafare like this. He hasnt been back for over a year. And,” she says, quieter, “he seems a little sad.” This takes me by surprise. I hadnt noticed anything like that, and I tell Anna shes projecting, a word she learned in her Psych 101

class that she uses on me all the time. She slaps me on the shoulder and goes to help a woman who looks older than God and apparently needed to come out into the rain to buy sandwich bags. And thats it.

“Has it been busy tonight?” I ask, looking around.

She shrugs as she takes the womans money. “A little bit. It picked up again once it started raining, but Mary is here so it wasnt too bad.” Mary is another cashier we work with who smells like menthols and Juicy Fruit. I dont know where she gets the gum from because I dont think they even make it anymore. Anna says shes got a stockpile of it at her house that she bought years ago. I think shes joking, though. I hope shes joking.

Otter comes back, setting the ice cream on the conveyer belt. I dont think he looks sad. He looks like Otter. Anna doesnt know what shes talking about. What would he have to be sad about? He has a killer job, gets paid lots of money. I am sure hes got a cool house or apartment or something. He doesnt have to worry about someone depending on him to survive. Hes not stuck in Seafare. Boo hoo.

Okay, Im sounding bitter. And Im staring. And he catches me. Otter grins crookedly. “Did you want something too, Bear?” he asks.

Yes! I shout in my head. I want you to go back to California! I want you to stop talking! I want to know why I came with you! I want to know why you let me come with you! Why, Otter? Why did you run away! Right when I needed—

“No,” I say out loud. “I dont need anything.”

He shrugs and says to Anna, “So you coming over to hang out? I know Creed would want to see you.”

Anna shakes her head. “I have to work late tonight and then study. I still have two finals left before Im out for the summer.”

“Hows school going for you?” he asks.

“Ill be glad when its done,” she says, taking his money and handing him the change. “Then you can help me to convince Bear to start taking a few classes in the fall. Youre going to be around for a while, right? How long are you here for?”

He hesitates. “I dont know. Probably for a little while. There are some things I need to work out,” he repeats, looking down at his hands.

“Well, good,” Anna says with a smile. “Then you can really help me make Bear go to school. Dont you think he could swing it? Hes got a few of us here that would be more than willing to help with Ty.” Shes starting to

piss me off.

“Yeah, sure,” he says. “So, I guess Ill see you later, then.” “Bye, Otter.”

He walks by me, arching his eyebrow. “Ill go wait in the car. Just dont be too long. I dont want to face the Kids wrath if we get back, and his ice cream is all melted.”

“His soy ice cream,” I say back. He doesnt stop and walks out the door, back into the rain.

Anna comes round the register and grabs onto my arm. “You see what Im talking about?” she asks. “Somethings wrong.”

I shake off her hand. “Nothings wrong, Anna. Just leave it alone. Otters Otter. Hes alright.” I turn to look at her levelly. “And would you just drop it with the whole school thing? You know I cant do anything about that right now.”

She looks at me knowingly, seeing right through me, and I divert my eyes. I can feel her flip her hair in anger, and I dont want to fight with her now. Ive got too many things on my mind to worry about one of us being mad at the other. I look back and kiss her lightly on the lips. “I gotta go. Otters waiting for me.”

She swats me on the ass as I turn to go. “Give me a call later if youre going to get drunk and need a ride.” Her voice is neutral.

I laugh, knowing that she knows Im not going to get drunk. I havent been drunk in a while. A very long while. Stupid shit happens when I drink.

Whoosh, the doors go as they open and *whoosh* they go again, closing behind me.

Its raining harder now. I dont say anything when I get back into the car,

and I hope that Otter doesnt want to talk, either. Most people dont realize that its nice to not talk every now and then. Talking makes things real. Talking puts things in the forefront. Talking is a waste of time. Nothing ever gets solved by talking about it. People speak too much and regret what they say, but if you dont speak at all, you cant feel like a jackass later.

I glance over at Otter out of the corner of my eye. His face is unreadable from what I can see, and thats only when a street lamp overhead passes by and flashes through the window. I think that maybe Anna can see things that I cant. Shes kind of cool like that, having insights into people that I never have.

Yeah, I give her shit about it, telling her shes prying where shes not wanted, telling her that shes *projecting*, but usually shes right. I sigh and look back out the window.

“What?” Otter asks.

“What what?” I say.

“It sounded like you just said something.”

“I didnt.”

“Oh.”

Its quiet a little bit longer before, “So you and Anna still, huh?” “Me and Anna,” I say.

“You guys have been together for a long time.”

“I guess. Off and on.” 5... 4... 3... 2... 1....

“So howre you holding up, Bear?”

Its inevitable. People always ask me this like I am going to break. Like Im going to fall down and never get up. I wish people werent so predictable. I wish Otter wasnt so predictable.

“Fine.”

“Oh.” A minute passes. Then, “Well, you seem to be doing well. And

Ty, man, the Kid seems to be getting bigger all the time.”

“People change. Thats what happens when you disappear for a while,” I think, then bunch my fists as I realize I said it out loud. *Shit.*

“Disappear?” he asks, sounding genuinely surprised.

“Forget it.”

“What do you mean, forget it? You cant say something like that and expect the conversation just to be over because you say it is, Bear.” I can hear him gritting his teeth and I think its because hes mad. Good. Let him be mad.

“Yes, I can,” I retort, hating how I sound.

Another minute passes. Rain on the roof beating a song.

I hear Otter snort and shake his head. “I didnt disappear, Derrick. You knew where I was.”

At that moment, I hate him. Using my name like that, like hes talking down to me, like hes better than me, like hes talking to a child. Thats something my moms infinite string of boyfriends use to do. I was never Bear to them, not that I wanted to be. But the way they said it, this knowledge in their eyes, grinning at me when my mom wasnt looking. Always with the same thought: *Yeah, I’m here with her. What are you going to do about it? Stay home and take care of your brother like you’re supposed to.*

“You left, *Oliver*,” I snap at him. “Call it whatever you want, but you left.”

His hands grip the steering wheel so that his knuckles turn white. I glare at him with my arms crossed against my chest, daring him to speak, daring him to try and say anything in rebuttal. He quickly looks over his shoulder and changes lanes, signaling to pull into a parking lot of a strip mall where tourists go to waste money on snow globes and dried starfish. Its all dark now, all of the shops closed since no one comes out in the rain. He pulls into a parking space and puts the Jeep into park. He sits there and stares straight ahead, tapping the steering wheel with the palm of his right hand. I turn away, feeling embarrassed. I should have kept my mouth shut. Wed be almost back to his house by now.

“Bear,” he starts, still gritting his teeth. He rubs his hands over his head, the short blond stubble slipping through his fingers. “Bear,” he starts again.

“What!” I huff, annoyed.

He turns to look at me, and now I can see what Anna was talking about. I can see the sadness in his eyes and etched across his face. If it was there before, it wasnt like this. I curse myself for being so weak, for calling him out on some bullshit he doesnt need to hear. Who the fuck am I to say anything? I am supposed to just grin and Bear it. Thats what Ive always done, and thats what I should have done now, regardless of how deeply, secretly angry I am.

“Look, Otter,” I say, suddenly nervous. He shakes his head and I stop. He goes back to bumping his palm on the steering wheel. I wait.

Finally, after ages, “Is that what you think? You think I abandoned you?”

I dont speak. I dont trust what would spill out of my mouth. He waits some more, his hand beating in time with the sound of the rain on the Jeeps roof.

Again, finally, “I didnt want for you to think I was abandoning you, Bear. I just thought....” He sighs. “I just thought it would be better for everyone if I wasnt around for a while.”

I can stay silent no longer. “Better for whom?” I cry out, gasping as I feel the sudden sting of tears. “Better for you? How could that have made anything better? I woke up and you were *gone*! Do you know what that felt like? Do you!” I know how I sound, but I cant stop. “You left, just like *she* did! And you *promised* you wouldnt! What the hell was I supposed to think?”

“Bear,” he says, a warning in his voice. “You dont know what was going on.”

“How could I?” I shout at him, raging. “You never told me anything! You did what you did to me, and then you left!”

His head snaps up to me, his eyes no longer sad, but blazing. "What I did to you? Jesus Christ! Who the hell do you think you are? You all but *told* me to leave!"

"I *know* who the fuck I am, you bastard. And I know who you are. You're just like *her*." I reach into my pocket for my wallet and pull it out. Inside is a piece of paper I've carried for a year and a half. Its yellowing with age and has ripped in a couple of places from how many times I have opened and read it. I hurl it at him. It bounces off his chin and into his lap. "Read it." He doesn't move. "*Read it!*" I shout.

He opens it and I see his face go white. "You... you kept this?" he whispers. "Bear, I—"

That's it, I can't take it anymore. I fumble about for the door handle, blinded by *tears* for Christ's sake, and throw open the door. I am furious. Furious at myself for crying in front of him, furious at Otter for tricking me like he did, furious at myself for thinking of him like that. *No!* I growl to myself, stomping through the rain, not caring where I am going. *Otter did this! I didn't do anything wrong. He tricked me! He tricked me and left! Just like I knew he would!* I think I hear him call my name, but my ears are pounding too hard to be sure. It sounds like the ocean. I'm about to start running when I feel strong arms wrap around me from behind, clasp on my chest. I turn around to swing at him but can only get partway before I get caught in a vise grip.

"Let go of me!" I snarl, wanting to kick and bite and punch and hurt.

"Bear," he says, his voice grumbling in my ear. "Bear."

"I'm not like you!" I say, still struggling to get away. "I'm not like that!"

"I know, Bear. I know." His breath is hot against my cold skin. "Don't you think I know that? I shouldn't have let it happen. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

I stop fighting him, feeling all the anger fall out of me like someone flipped a switch. "Why are you here?" I moan. "Why did you come back?"

He grabs me by the chin, forcing me to stare into his eyes. "It has nothing to do with what happened between us. As far as I am concerned, that was a mistake. We never should have kissed."

3. Where Bear Looks to the Past

O_{KAY}, time out! Seriously. This is getting way out of hand. And no complaining, either! The way you'll hear it from him will probably make me sound like a fag. Well, I'm not, so you can get that out of your head right now. Besides, I'm the one telling the story, and I'm going to tell it my own way. You'll just have to deal with it. And besides, this whole thing would make a lot more sense if I could go back a little bit to tell you what led up to this moment. Maybe it'll make sense to me too as to why I am standing outside of the Seashack: Gifts and Curios, clutching my best friend's brother in the rain. Shit like this isn't supposed to happen to me.

I've got too much to deal with already.

T_{HERE} I stood, my mind reeling, hearing those words play over and over again in my head:

*i know this is going to be hard for yu to read
i have to leave
tom sez that ty can't go
i am going to leave him here with yu
please don't try looking for me
mom*

I thought it was some kind of joke. I mean, it had to be, right? Nobody does that to their kids. I reread the letter, all the while thinking any minute now, someone was going to jump out and say, "*Ha ha, Bear! Ha ha on you!*" I read through the letter a second time, then a third, and a fourth, but the words never changed. It became impossible to read it the fifth time, and I didn't understand why until I saw my hand holding the letter was shaking so violently that the words were illegible.

"Mom?" I croaked out, stumbling into the small living room. The tattered thrift-store couch where she would normally be at that time of night was empty. I turned and walked down the short hallway into her room. I threw open the door and slapped the light on. No one was there. Neither was any of the shit she kept in her room. I pulled open her chest of drawers, one by one, finding them all empty until I got to the last. In the last there was a framed picture of me and the Kid that Otter had given to my mom as a birthday present. It showed us walking up the beach when Ty was three, me holding

onto his hand, him pointing toward something on the ground. It was the only picture she had of us, and she left it.

I clutched the wall, feeling bile tickle the back of my throat. *This can't be happening. This is not happening.* I wanted to sink into the darkness that was threatening the corners of my vision. It would have been so much easier to just curl into a ball in the corner rather than face what was really going on. It would be so much easier just to....

I felt something poking into my stomach, and I opened my eyes to see that Id slumped to my knees, my head pressing against the wall. I still held the picture in my hand, and its corner was jutting up against my stomach. Anger tore through me, and I slammed the picture into the wall, feeling it shatter around my hands. Glass bit into my skin, cutting my palm. This pissed me off even more. The remains of the frame crashed to the ground, followed by little droplets of blood. I looked stupidly down at the picture, watching first my face go red then the Kids, blood roses blooming across the captured memory.

Ty. Shit.

I got up quickly and ran to the room we share. His bed was pressed up against the right side of the room and hadnt been touched. He wasnt there. I stopped for a moment and tried to think of where the hell my mom was supposed to leave him today while she went to work. I didnt think he was with our neighbor, Mrs. Paquinn, because she normally came over to our apartment to watch him as Ty liked to play in our room. I figured it was the best place to start and was heading to the front door when my cell phone vibrated in my pocket.

I reached into my pocket, using my cut hand and not realizing it until I felt a piece of glass press into my skin further. I pulled out my phone quickly and saw that it was Anna. "Anna, I cant talk right now," I said when I answered. "I have to find Ty. Shes gone. Shes gone."

"What are you talking about?" she said. "The Kid is here with me. Your mom dropped him after I got home from work and begged me to watch him. She said you were going to come pick him up when you got off. Wait... Bear, what do you mean shes gone? Did something happen to your mom?"

"Tys with you?" I said hoarsely.

"Yes, hes sleeping on the couch. Bear, whats wrong? Why do you sound like that? Is everything okay?"

"No," I said and began to cry.

I ^{TRIED}to drive over to Annas house as quickly as I could and would have gotten there sooner had I not pulled over every two seconds or so to alternate between throwing up and having to punch something. By the time I got to my girlfriends house, I was so worked up again that I couldnt see straight. I clutched the letter in my good hand and made my way to the door, trying not to destroy Mrs. Grants flowers that lined the front walkway. Someone must have heard me coming because the porch light flashed on and the front door opened. Anna rushed out to me, throwing her arms around my neck. I hugged her back, breaking yet again, knowing I was getting blood on her but not caring. I thought she kept saying, “*What happened, what happened?*” but I couldnt answer her just then. So she held me, rocking me back and forth, whispering nothings into my ear, until it was all out of me, and I couldnt give anymore.

S^{HE} eventually got me to go inside her house and told me she needed to clean my hand.

“Wheres Ty?” I asked, ignoring her.

“Hes sleeping on the couch.”

“Are your parents here?” I said as I pushed past her.

“No, theyre still in Portland until tomorrow. Bear, whats going on? What happened to your mom?” I heard her following me into the living room.

I thrust the letter at her without looking. I felt her take it from my hand. I rounded the corner from the kitchen to the den and saw the Kid asleep on the couch, covered in a SpongeBob SquarePants blanket that Anna had gotten for him for when he came to her house. I reached down and rubbed the top of his head gently, not wanting to wake him. I think that was more for my benefit than for his. I hadnt yet thought of what I was going to say to my almost-six-year-old brother when he woke up. How do you explain to someone that their mom is gone? I still hadnt even processed it myself yet.

“Bear?” Anna said, her tone worried so I know it hadnt been the first time she called my name.

“What?” I asked gruffly, not taking my eyes of Ty.

“Your hand... its bleeding.”

I looked down. I had forgotten all about it. “Ah, shit.” I winced. Drops of blood were still running down my fingers, dropping onto the carpet. “Im sorry. Your mom is going to kill me.”

She touched me on the shoulder, urging me to follow her. I took one last look at Ty and followed her to the bathroom. She made me sit on the toilet

while she tweezed out broken bits of glass. She asked me what happened. I told her I broke a picture. She nodded and got out the peroxide, and it stung like hell but it didnt matter. She covered my palm in a heavy bandage and wrapped my entire hand with gauze. She didnt think I would need stitches. She was cleaning up when the doorbell rang.

“Shit!” she said, scowling. “I told them not to do that. If theyve woken the Kid...” She rushed out the bathroom door.

“Who?” I asked, following her. For some reason I was scared that she had called the police.

“Get the door. Ill check on Ty.”

“But—”

“Bear, its fine.”

I stared after her and then went to the door. Creed stood on the front stoop, followed closely by Otter.

Creed spoke first, obviously relieved to see me. “What the hell is going on? Anna said something bad happened and to get over here. Wheres the Kid? What happened to your hand? Dude, have you been crying? Why do you smell like barf?”

“Creed, keep your voice down!” Anna hissed, walking back into the kitchen. “Youre lucky you didnt wake up Ty when you rang the doorbell, dumbass.”

He pretended to look hurt for a moment and then turned back to me. “Well?”

I handed him the letter. Otter read it over his shoulder, page by page, each of them growing identical looks of disbelief as they went on. Otter finished before Creed did and immediately came over to me and wrapped his arms around me. I thought I was all cried out, but a few more slid out as my forehead rested on his shoulder. He didnt have to say anything as Creed spoke for all of us.

“This is some fucked-up shit right here.”

LATER, we all sat on the floor in the living room, the others talking in hushed tones so as not to wake the Kid. I knew we probably shouldnt have run the risk of having him hear us as I still had no idea of what I was going to say, but I didnt want to let him out of my sight. Some irrational part of me kept thinking that if I turned away, even for a second, that he would disappear too. I felt numb as I watched him lay there under SpongeBob, needing a haircut. Well, he needed his mom more, but that didnt appear to be happening anytime soon.

Anna hovered near me, holding my unmarked hand. Creed and Otter were unwrapping the other, wanting to make sure it didnt need to be seen to right then. I felt the gauze fall off and heard Otter hiss softly. I didnt want to look at it because I knew it would depress me more. Apparently, given the years of medical experience between the two of them, my doctors decided it could wait till morning, and I could feel Otter wrapping it back up gently.

Creed sank back onto his elbows. "I hate to state the obvious, but what do we do now?" I couldnt help but notice how he said *we*.

Otter rubbed his eyes as if he had a headache. "First thing we gotta do is find out where she ran off to. It said in her letter that Tom got a job somewhere. Bear, do you know where she went? Did she say anything to you in the last couple of days or so? Or did Tom?"

I shook my head.

"Anna, did she say anything to you when she dropped the Kid off?"

Anna thought for a moment. "Not that I can remember. She just asked me if it would be okay if I watched Ty until Bear got off of work. I wasnt planning on doing anything until then, so I said okay. I dont even remember if she was with Tom when she did it. If she was, he must have stayed in the car. What about this job, though? Do any of us even know where Tom worked at?"

"I think he was in construction," Creed said. "Well, at least he *looked* like he was in construction." Otter smacked him on the back of the head. "Whyd you do that for?" he grimaced.

"Youre not helping," Otter growled at him before looking back at me. "So we dont know what he did or where they went. There has to be some way to track them down. Did she have credit cards or a checking account or anything like that?"

Anna laughed bitterly as she answered for me. "Oh come on, Otter. You know the answer to that. She never had any kind of bank account. Bear is the only one who did, and she would always take money from that."

"First thing in the morning, then," Otter said, "you need to call your bank and take her name off your stuff or change your PIN number or whatever."

"Why?" Creed protested. "If she tried to take money out, wouldnt that tell us where shes at?"

Anna glared at him. "Yes, it would, after she took all the money out. Which she may have done already."

"Oh, yeah."

I giggled.

You know how sometimes you can laugh at the most inappropriate time? When everything seems bleak and gray, and you know you should be feeling sad/depressed/angry but for some reason, something strikes you as funny in a sick, non-funny kind of way? Like a funeral. Or your mom leaving. It was one of those.

Creed looked at me like I'd lost my mind, which I was on my way to doing. "Whats so funny, Bear?"

"\$137.50," I said, snorting out spurts of laughter.

"What?" Otter said, frowning at me.

"S-she left m-m-me a hundred thirty-seven d-dollars and fifty cents!" I was shaking by the time I finished, feeling the mirth crawl through me like a tapeworm. My vision was narrowing again, and I could feel my gorge rising, but I couldn't stop *laughing*. "T-there were two kwuh-kwuhquarters put in with the rest! She left me kwuh-quarters!"

They all stared at me, mouths agape.

I staggered up and ran to the bathroom, dry-heaving as soon as I hit the toilet. I heard someone chase after me, but I frantically waved my hand at the door, sending them away. My stomach clenched and my bowels felt loose, and the world grayed slightly as I gripped the seat. Wave after wave of nausea rose through me, and I think I passed out for a moment as I felt my head hit the side of the bathtub next to the toilet. My face felt swollen and my breath sour. I moaned.

Oh GOD, this can't be happening, I thought. This is just a nightmare. Any second now, I'm going to wake up and feel relief when I realize it was all just a bad dream. I'll look over at the clock and see that it's not quite time for me to get up yet, so I'll pull the blanket over my head and crawl back down into darkness and won't I just feel so much better? Because this can't be real. Nobody does stuff like this to someone else. Especially a parent. That's why this can't be real, because not even my mother could do this.

It is real, though, Bear, a voice whispered back. You know it's real because of that taste in your mouth, the headache you're beginning to feel. The cut on your hand. That sickness in your heart. That's how you know it's real. You could never actually feel those things if this were a dream. That's not the question you should be asking, though, if this is a dream. The question you should be asking is what you're going to do now? Because you're awake?

I didn't want to do anything then. I wanted to lay there for the next two months and then pack up my shit and get the hell out of Seafare like I was

supposed to have done. That was the plan and what I had worked my ass off for to be able to do. I was supposed to leave and go to Eugene and go to school and become a writer or a teacher or whatever the fuck else I wanted to be. A reporter. An astronaut. The President of the fucking United States. I had gotten a scholarship, for Christs sake! I was going to become someone that I wanted to be, not be forced into something I didnt. As I lay there, her letter, that goddamn letter, swam through my head, taunting me. *Why do you need college?* it said. *That scholarship will be there later, right?*

I need you to do something for me.

I need you to do something for me.

You were always better at taking care of him than me.

I heaved again. And again. And again.

After some length of time—when I was sure there was nothing liquid left in me—I rose unsteadily to my feet. I went over to the sink and rinsed my stinking mouth out. The water felt good against my fevered skin. I splashed it on my face, trying hard to ignore my reflection. I didnt want to see what I looked like right then. I knew what I would see on my face, and if I had dared to look, to see that resignation, that *anger*, I would have hated myself for it. I would have hated her for it, more than I already did.

And I would have hated Ty. Thats the one that hurt most of all.

I WALKED back into the living room, feeling more tired than Id ever felt in my life. Anna rose immediately and wrapped her arms around me, squeezing me to the point where I couldnt breathe. I left my arms at my side. I couldnt give her what she wanted. Not right then.

She must have felt it, too, because she pulled away and looked at me. I could see that she had been crying and part of me was annoyed by that. After all, what did *she* have to cry about? *She* just didnt get screwed over. *She* didnt have to worry about her future. *She* didnt have to worry about how she was going to take care of a fucking little kid. Right then, I am ashamed to say, I didnt want to be with her anymore. I wanted her to go away and not come back. After all, wasnt that what everyone of any importance was doing now anyway? I tried to check myself before this came welling out, but she could see the anger on my face, and she flinched. Some small part of me hoped that she knew it wasnt directed at her, not really. But only a small part.

“Bear, Otter and I—” Creed started, but I cut him off.

“No,” I said. “We arent going to talk about this in here. I dont want to wake him up.” With that, I turned and headed for the kitchen, knowing they

were exchanging looks behind my back as they followed.

I sat down at the table and waited until they had too. Anna still looked upset and stared off toward the living room, and Creed was looking down at his hands. Only Otter looked at me, so I focused on him.

“Were not going to do anything about her,” I said.

He looked at me, a ghost of his grin haunting his lips. “Why did I know you were going to say that?”

Anna looked bewildered. “Bear, you cant be serious! Of course you have to find her! What the hell else are you going to do? You cant take care of Ty by yourself! You cant let her get away with this!”

“What the hell else am I supposed to do?” I asked her, anger filling my voice. “What do you think would happen if I found her? Drag her ass back here? How long do you think it would take for her to leave again? Or maybe you think I could just leave Ty with her! Leave Ty with her and go on my merry fucking way. How long do you think it would take before she dumped him somewhere else?” Anna started to cry again, and I felt bad, but not so bad that I would retract what I was saying or change my mind.

“Bear,” Creed said gently, “what about school? You cant go to school and work like you planned to do and be able to take care of the Kid. Theres not enough time in the world for that.”

“I know,” I said, trying my damndest to keep the bitterness out of my voice. “Thats why Im not going.”

“Oh, Bear,” Anna said, clutching her face.

“Dont give me that,” I snapped. “Its not like this is your problem.” “What the hell are you talking about?” Creed hissed at me. “This is our

problem as much as it is yours. I love that kid as much as you do, so dont spout that line of bullshit to me.”

“Bear, at least we should call the police or *something*,” Anna sobbed.

“No. No police. What do you think would happen if they were called? Do you really think they would let Ty stay with me? Of course not! Think about it for one goddamned second. They would take him away quicker than you could blink and drop him with some social worker or a foster home. I wont let that happen to him. Now, I cant stop you from telling your parents,” I said, warning them. “They would probably figure it out at some point anyway. But I swear to God if any of them call the cops or do anything to find her, Ill take Ty and well go someplace else, and you will never see either of us again.”

Anna and Creed stared at me in disbelief. I wouldnt look at Otter for some

reason. I wonder now if it was because I was scared that he was thinking bad things about me, and I didnt want to see it written all over his face. I dont know why.

Creed sighed and rubbed his hands through his hair. “Well, if theres one good thing about this, at least my family has a whole shitload of disposable income.”

I shook my head. “I dont want your money, Creed.” With that, the whole table erupted.

I know what youre thinking: Bear, youre an asshole. But lets see you be seventeen and decide to give up your whole future. Lets see you realize that you cant depend on anyone because sooner or later, they all leave. I know it wasnt fair that I immediately distrusted everyone around me, but I didnt know what else to do. My pride was the only thing I really had left that was *mine*, and I would be damned if they took that from me too. You also have to understand that that was a while ago, remember? Things are a little bit different now.

But at the time, it was still all too fresh in my mind.

Creed and Anna kept trying to talk over each other, protesting everything I had said, until I heard Otter say, “Everyone out. *Now.*” I had only seen Otter truly pissed off once or twice, and it had never been directed toward me. But when Otter got mad, everyone else got scared. He was a big guy, even then, but he never really yelled. There was, however, this quiet anger that he had that could make you quake in your shoes. Anna and Creed heard the tone in his voice and ceased immediately.

“Out,” he repeated.

Whatever, I thought as I stood. I needed to go check on Ty.

“Not you, Bear. You sit down.”

Yes, sir, I thought meekly, feeling strangely like a child about to be punished. Anna and Creed looked back and forth between me and Otter and must not have liked what they saw because they left very quickly. Once again, I didnt dare look at Otter because I was scared what I would see, but not so scared to the point where Id change my mind about what I was deciding to do. If Otter was going to try to convince me otherwise, then he could go to hell. I didnt care *how* mad he got. Let him tear the world apart for all I cared. I knew what I had to do.

“Now you listen to me and you listen good,” he said, his voice level and stern. “I know this situation sucks. I cant even begin to know what it feels

like, but I can at least imagine. What I *can't* imagine, is how you can sit there and try to drive everyone else away. We are only trying to help, and this would go a lot smoother if you just let us."

"But—" I protested.

Otter cut me off. "Bear, *shut up*." I glared at him, and he didn't avert his eyes. When he was sure I wasn't going to try and speak again, he continued. "This happened to you, yes, and it happened to Ty. But if you think that it doesn't affect anyone else, you need to guess again. Why do you think we're here now if we didn't want to help?" I opened my mouth to speak until he growled, "That was a rhetorical question. Now, you're going to let us help you, let us be there for you, and if I hear any more of this „on my own bullshit you're spewing, I will not hesitate to knock you down a few pegs myself. Do you understand?"

I nodded weakly.

"Good. Now, are you sure you don't want to call the police? And that you don't want to try and look for her?"

I thought for a moment, then shrugged. He seemed to take that as a no, because he knew that's what I really meant.

He sighed. "This is such a shit storm, Bear. You know it's going to get a hell of a lot harder before it gets any easier. I don't know whether to hug you or throttle you."

I smiled at this, though it felt foreign on my face.

He continued. "So you know we have to tell Mom and Dad about this, and I know that Anna will do the same. I promise to do my best to make sure that this doesn't spread too far but the only way that's going to happen is if you let people help you. And I swear to God, if you even think of taking off with Ty, I will hunt you down myself and drag you back here. You'll be locked in a room until the Kid is old enough to make decisions for himself. Only then would I consider letting you go. Do we understand each other?"

I didn't move, didn't say anything.

He had a pained expression on his face, and he reached out and grabbed my good hand. "Bear, you have to promise me we'll work this out. *Together*. We're not moving from this spot until you promise me."

I didn't know what to say to Otter. No one had ever talked to me like that before, and I was angry and hurt. Subdued. But for a moment there, didn't I feel like I was worth something? Didn't the weight of his hand, the words he had spoken, make me feel warm? I felt the heat rise to my face, and I looked

down at our hands, and felt another tear slip from my eye. *What is going on?* I thought frantically.

“Bear?”

“I promise,” I said, my voice breaking, and he leapt up from the table and pulled me to him again. He crushed me into him, and I wanted to crawl inside of him and disappear. I tried to make myself smaller as he rocked me back and forth saying, “I know. I know. I know.”

And I believed him.

WHEN I finally felt okay enough to let Otter go, he put his arm around my shoulders and walked me back out into the living room. Anna and Creed sat where we had before, whispering back and forth. They heard us entering and stopped in mid-sentence. I tried not to think about what they had been saying, knowing I would probably get mad again, and then Otter would go for round two. He dropped his arm from my shoulders and stood next to me, waiting for me to speak.

“Im... sorry,” I said, looking down at the floor. I didnt know what else to say.

Otter took that as his cue. “Bear has had a change of heart. He knows were only looking out for him. But this only goes as far as it needs to. I dont know how were going to keep a lid on this forever, but well have to do our best while we can.”

Creed nodded and Anna stood. She walked over to me and grabbed my hand and started pulling me toward her room. I started to beg off, but Otter pushed me away, telling me he would keep an eye out on Ty. I looked back into his eyes and saw something there, something I couldnt quite make out. He caught me watching him and smiled that Otter smile. Then I was around the corner, and he vanished from my sight.

Anna didnt speak as she pulled me into the doorway of her room. She made sure I was through and shut the door behind us. She turned off the lights and began to take off my clothes. I knew what she was doing, and I didnt want to stop her. I needed to feel close to someone right then, feel them hold me, feel their heart against mine. For just a few moments, I needed to forget about the aches, forget about the future, forget about the past. If this was going to be my last moment of freedom, I knew I needed to let it all out of me. As I entered her, I saw stars exploding all around me, and they were bright, and they were loud.

But there was still something nagging at back of my mind. Something about

him.

A COUPLE of hours later, Anna lay asleep beside me, curled up into a ball at my shoulder. I couldn't sleep. The weight of the world had fallen back against my shoulders, and I wasn't able to push it away to let sleep come. I grew restless and, moving so as not to wake up my girlfriend, I pushed myself out of the bed and closed the door behind me.

The house was dark, and I bumped my way into the living room. I didn't see anyone there except for Ty, who was illuminated by the moonlight pouring in softly from the window. I thought that Otter and Creed had gone home, and I couldn't help but feel slightly disappointed. I told myself it was because I was hoping that they were as awake as I was. I hoped that at least Otter was still—

I heard a chuckle from off to my left. I looked over and saw him sitting on the ground, his back to the wall. "Feel any better?" he asked me.

I shrugged and went over and sat on the floor next to Ty. I pushed away a lock of hair that had fallen onto his face. I knew, like I had just had, that this was going to be his last bit of innocence. When he woke up, there would be questions, questions I still didn't know the answer to. I hadn't heard Otter move, but the next time he spoke, it came from right beside me.

"He's a good kid," he said. "You'll do right by him. I've known you since you were almost his age, and you turned out okay, and you didn't have anyone like he does."

"I had Creed and your parents. I had Anna." I paused, considering. "I had you."

I heard him laugh again. "Yeah, I guess you did. And you turned out okay despite even that."

"Where's Creed?"

"He went to sleep in the guest room. Apparently he can't sleep on the floor even for one damn night."

"Why aren't you sleeping?"

I felt him shrug as he was now sitting down next to me. "I told you I would watch him. I meant it."

I bumped my shoulder into him. "Thanks."

He bumped me back. "You're welcome."

We sat there for a while, listening to Ty's breathing, not saying anything. I finally felt myself growing tired, and Otter saw my head nod and told me to go back to bed. He would stay out there tonight. I shook my head.

“I shouldn’t,” I said. “I need to be here when Ty wakes up. If this is going to happen tomorrow like I think it is, then he needs to see me right away.”

“Okay, Bear. Do you know where Anna keeps any pillows or extra blankets?”

“In the hall closet.”

I heard him get up and walk away. I looked back at Ty, and my heart sank yet again. In a few hours, he would be awake. In a few hours, I was going to have to explain to my little brother what it felt like to have to grow up way before he was supposed to. I tried rehearsing what I was going to say, trying to imagine if he would even understand. But in the end, I was no further than where I started.

Otter came back, his arms full of bedding. He made me get up and spread the blanket next to the couch. He threw down the pillows, and I collapsed onto the ground, feeling my body shutting down. I laid on my back staring up at the ceiling, still able to see the Kids fingers as his hand dangled off the side of the couch. Otter stood where he had before, seeming unsure what to do.

“Are you gonna lay down or stand watch all night?” I asked, suddenly amused.

He appeared to hesitate for a moment, then lay next to me, a few feet away from me. We lay silent.

Then, “Otter?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks.”

“For what?”

“You know, for what you said. For being here.” “Sure, Bear.” His hand brushed mine.

I was almost asleep when, “Bear?”

“Yeah?”

“Happy birthday.”

Then I was gone, a smile starting to form on my face.

I DREAMT that night. I dreamt a lot. But the one that sticks out the most was where I was following someone I didn’t know. I tried to catch up with him but every time I was close enough to grasp a piece of his clothing, he drifted away on an ocean current.

I WOKE near dawn. For a moment, I didn’t know where I was. I opened my eyes and saw the bottom of a couch. My face was almost resting against it. I felt pressure from my back and remembered where I was. I squeezed my eyes

shut, trying to will it all away. Then the thing pressing against my back moved slightly, and I knew it was Otter. I heard him snoring softly, his wide back settled against mine. His body was pushing me into the couch where Ty still lay asleep. The dust from space near the floor tickled my nose. I shoved gently away from it, and turned over and huddled up next to Otter. He was warm. He was there. I fell back asleep.

I WOKE sometime later to a tapping on my forehead. I scowled, not wanting to open my eyes, the pillow I was lying on feeling too good to want to move. I squinted up, annoyed, and saw the Kid staring down at me from the couch, his eyes dancing.

“Hey, Bear,” he said.

“Hey, yourself,” I groaned, closing my eyes again.

“Why you sleeping on Otter?” he whispered, clearly amused.

I opened my eyes in a hurry. I turned my head slightly to the left and saw that the pillow I was laying on was Otters shoulder. His right arm was under my neck and wrapped around me on the other side, fingers splayed across my chest. One of my legs lay spread over his. He was still asleep. *What the hell?* I thought. I slowly extricated myself from him, never taking my eyes from his face. My heart was beating loudly in my ears, and I felt my skin buzzing. *What the hell?*

“Did we have a sleepover?” the Kid asked.

“Uh, yeah,” I said. Otter mumbled something in his sleep and turned over on his side, away from me.

“Im hungry,” Ty said, stretching. “Do you think Anna still has Lucky Charms?”

“I dont know, Kid. Lets go look.” I picked him up from the couch and carried him toward the kitchen.

He pulled on my ear. “What?” I asked, suddenly way too awake. “Dont you want to wake up Otter so he can have some Lucky Charms with us?”

“Otters dont eat Lucky Charms.”

He looked at me quizzically. “But Bears do, right?”

“Sure, Kid. Thats all Bears eat,” I said, taking one last look at Otter, splayed out on the floor. I trembled.

I carried Ty into the kitchen and set him down at the table. I walked over to one of the cabinets and pulled down the box of cereal and grabbed a bowl from the dishwasher. I set them in front of him, and he immediately opened the box, pouring the cereal into the bowl. I took the milk from the fridge and

set it next to him. As soon as he was old enough to, the Kid never allowed anyone to make his cereal for him. He always wanted to do it himself. I sat in the chair beside him, my mind racing from everything.

“Arent you gonna have some, Bear?” he asked, smacking his lips over the spoon.

I leaned over and ruffled his hair. “I was just going to munch off of yours, if thats okay.”

He looked down at the bowl then back up at me. “Okay,” he said slowly. “But you only get *little* bites. Not big ones.” He held the spoon in one hand and picked up two marshmallows and put them on the spoon. They were the green clovers. He knew those were my favorite. He held the spoon toward my mouth, and I chomped them off, making a noise that made him giggle. “Hey, Bear!” the Kid said.

“Hey, yourself!” I said back.

“Its your birthday!”

“It sure is.”

“I made you something! Well, Anna helped, but I made most of it. Can I go get it?”

“Sure, Kid. Just make sure you be quiet, okay?”

He nodded and took another bite and then jumped down from his chair, running out of the room. His socks made little scuffling noises on the tile.

I waited until he was gone then sunk back into my chair. My head was hurting. My neck was sore, apparently after spending the last few hours nuzzled into Otters neck. I groaned out loud, thanking God only Ty had found us like that. What would Creed have thought, seeing me sprawled against his brother? What about Anna? What the fuck was I thinking?

Whatever. I was tired and just rolled over onto his arm in my sleep. It's no big deal. Who cares, anyway? So what if Creed had seen us? What, he would have called us a bunch of fags? It's not like we were doing anything. Otter's not like that. Im not like that. It was an accident.

Before I could think about it anymore (not that I wanted to), the Kid came running back into the room, holding a big piece of construction paper. He handed it to me then crawled back into his chair and began to eat his cereal again. I looked down at the paper he had given me. It was folded in half and on the outside it said *TO BEAR FROM YOUR BROTHER*. I laughed quietly and opened it. Inside there was a drawing underneath more words that spelled out *HAPPY BIRTHDAY BEAR* and *I LOVE YOU*. The drawing showed five

stick figures standing on what appeared to be the beach. I could tell which one was Ty because he had drawn himself smaller than the others. Anna was drawn having long black hair. There were three others.

“That ones you,” he said, pointing to the one standing next to the version of himself. “And thats Uncle Creed standing by Anna, and thats Otter standing on the other side of you.” He had drawn us all holding hands. I was holding the Kids hand and Otters. *Oh for the love of God, it’s just a picture!*

“Thanks, Kid. I think youre going to be a famous artist someday.” “Maybe. Or a detective. I havent decided yet. Can I have some more Lucky Charms?”

“Yeah.” I was still staring down at the picture, realizing that he hadnt drawn Mom into the picture. I put it down on the table. “Ty,” I said, suddenly unsure of what to say next. I was saved when Creed walked into the room, yawning.

“Uncle Creed!” Ty yelped and jumped from the chair. Creed caught him and swung him in circles.

“Hey, Kid! Whats the word?”

“Did you know its Bears birthday?”

He stopped spinning Ty and looked over at me. “Sure did, Kid. Your big bros getting to be an old man now.” I could see the concern in his eyes as he realized that I hadnt said anything to Ty yet.

Ty didnt seem to notice anything was amiss. “Yeah, hes an old Bear now. Well have to put him in a home. Are we going to have cake for Bear today?”

“Cake?” Creed said, setting him back on his chair. “I bet we could swing that. What kind of cake do you think Bear wants?”

Ty made a face and grumbled, “Probably something gross like coconut. I hate coconut.”

“Ill tell you what: if Bear wants coconut cake, Ill make sure we get you a cake of your own.”

Ty looked up at him suspiciously. “But its not my birthday.”

“Thats okay. Hey, Kid. Do you mind if I steal your brother for a minute? I have to talk to him about some grown-up stuff.”

“That sounds boring,” Ty pronounced. “Can I go wake up Otter?”

“Yeah, sure. As a matter of fact, make sure you jump on him and hit his face with the pillow okay? Thats the only way that Otters wake up.”

Ty took another bite, then left the table again. Creed turned to me, eyebrows raised. “I take it you havent said anything yet.”

I shrugged. “He just woke me up a few minutes ago. I havent had time to do

much of anything.” I heard a roar from the living room, then Tys high-pitched laughter.

“Do you want us to be here when you do?” Creed asked, putting his hand on my arm.

“I guess. Id think it was better if all of us were here, dont you? That way hell see that he still has us.”

“Okay,” he said, getting up. “Ill go get Anna. Its probably best we do this now.” He started to walk toward Annas room. I looked down at my hands, once again wondering what the hell I was about to do. “Hey, Bear?” I looked up and saw Creed standing near the entryway.

“Happy birthday, dude. Im sorry it has to be like this, but, you know. Happy birthday.” I nodded, and he went to Annas room.

I was only alone for a couple of seconds when I heard Tys laughter pouring down the hallway as Otter entered, carrying the Kid upside down.

“Put me down, Otter!” the Kid shrieked.

“You going to hit me again with a pillow?”

“No!”

“Promise?”

“Yes!”

Otter set him down in his chair. He then came around the table and stood beside me. He put his hand on my shoulder. I let it sit there for a second until I remembered where I had found myself upon waking. I shrugged it off.

“You okay, Bear?” he asked, not moving from my side.

“Im fine,” I said gruffly, trying my best to avoid his eyes. “I wish people would stop asking me that.” *And I wish you would go away*, I finished in my head.

“Bear,” he said warningly.

“Oh, knock it off, Otter. Im not going to do anything stupid.” “I didnt say you were,” he shot back. “God, youre just some kind of

fun in the morning, arent you?” And even though he didnt mean it in *that* way, I still took it as an intimate thing, a secret thing, shared just between us, two false lovers who see each other first thing as the sun rises. *I bet he made me sleep that way. I sure as hell know I didn’t have anything to do with it. I’m not like that, and I thought Otter wasn’t either. I don’t care if he is, but I know who I am. Besides, I don’t need that kind of aggravation right now. But not that it would matter, because I’m not.* I grinned sickly.

“What you guys fighting about?” the Kid asked. Id forgotten he was

there. I glanced up at him and saw he had a marshmallow stuck to his cheek. I reached across the table and took it off.

“Were not fighting, Ty,” I said quietly. “Thats just the way grown-ups talk some times.”

He looked back and forth between me and Otter. “Bear, just because youre eighteen now, doesnt mean youre a grown-up,” he said matter-offactly.

“Yes, it does,” I snapped, trying to direct my anger anywhere but at Ty, but not succeeding. He didnt even flinch. Instead he took another bite and glanced casually back at Otter.

“Youre right. Bear isnt much fun in the morning. I think its because you dont make a very good pillow,” the Kid said. *Oh goddammit!* My face burned. I covered it with my hands.

“I think youve got that one right, Kid,” Otter said softly. I knew he was looking at me. “Otters dont make very good pillows.”

I lowered my hands and was about to say something, *anything*, when Anna and Creed walked back in the room. I got up quickly and walked over to Anna, catching her by surprise. I wrapped my arms around her and hugged her tightly. I could feel her soft body against mine and was pleased when I started to get turned on a little bit. Pleased, until I saw my gaze trapped on Otters over Annas shoulder, his expression unreadable. He was the first to look away.

Good, I thought savagely. *Good. Good.*

“Um, Bear?” Anna said. “Youre kind of choking me.” I realized I had been squeezing her harder and harder until Otter had finally turned away. I let go of her, and she peered over at me with concerned eyes.

“Im *fine*,” I said before the question came out of her mouth. I knew, even then, that I was going to be getting that a lot.

“Okay,” she said, unconvinced. She gave me one last look before turning to the Kid. “Lucky Charms?” she exclaimed in a cheery voice. “Are you sure you dont want French toast?”

The Kid grinned through a mouthful of congealed sugar. “Can we put peanut butter and syrup on em? Can I help?”

“Peanut butter and syrup I can do, but I think that Bear has something he wants to talk to you about,” she said, picking him up from his chair and wrapping him in the same kind of hug I had been giving her. He complained lightly but hugged her back. She set him back down, and I could see the beginnings of tears in her eyes as she looked back at me. Anger welled in me,

black and oily. *Don't you dare start crying. If you start, Ty will start, and he's going to anyway, but don't you start, don't you dare.*

"Bear?" the Kid said. "What do you want to talk to me about? Are we going somewhere for your birthday? Cause I was thinking we could go to the aquarium and see Otter the otter and Todd the seal," he stated, naming his favorite animals at the tourist trap on the outskirts of Seafare.

I looked at Anna, who was pulling out bread and eggs, but I knew she was listening intently. I was glad to see the tears had dried up somewhat. I looked at Creed, lounging back in his chair, a thoughtful expression on his face. And I looked at Otter, to Otter, but his face remained passive, as it had before, betraying nothing. I sighed heavily and sat down opposite Ty.

"Kid," I started and was alarmed when it came out thick and emotional. My face was suddenly wet, my heart wrung, my throat constricted. *Jesus Christ, I gasped in my head. Now don't you start! Where the hell did this come from?*

"Bear?" I heard Ty say, suddenly concerned. I heard the scraping of his chair as he pushed it back, and I heard Creed rise as well, but Otter made him sit down again. Ty came running around the table and climbed into my lap.

"Whats wrong, Bear? You cant be sad! Its your birthday! We dont have to go to the dumb aquarium. We can do what you want to do." He was petting my hair.

I shook my head and cleared my throat, trying to rein in this unwelcome display of emotion. When I spoke, my voice sounded raw and flat in my ears.

"We can do whatever you want to today. And not just today, either. If you want to do something, you tell me, and somehow well do it. Okay?" I leaned my forehead against his, feeling his hands in my hair, smelling his sweet Lucky Charms breath on my face. "But I have to tell you something now, and I am going to need you to be a big boy for me, okay?" I felt him pull back.

"Is she dead?" he asked, his voice the only thing betraying his age. It was said so quietly, so maturely, that I cursed her under my breath for what he was about to become. I knew what I was about to do to him, and I hated myself for it. "Is she dead?" he asked again, his voice growing insistent.

"No, Ty, shes not. Shes..." *Disappeared? Abandoned us? Run off with Tom? Given up the only flesh and blood she has left in this world? Pick one, Bear, hurry up and pick one! Any will do!* "Shes... gone, Kid. Shes gone."

"Whered she go?" he asked, his voice as flat as my own now.

"I dont know. She said that she wanted to go away with Tom and get a job somewhere, but I dont know where she went."

“Shes coming back, right?” he asked. I could feel him start to tremble in my arms. I crushed him tighter into me.

“No, Kid,” I whispered. “I dont think she is. I think shes going to stay away.”

“Why would she leave? Why did she go away?”

“I dont know, Ty. I wish I did but I dont.”

I heard the first gasping breath come out of his little body. “Bear!” he cried into my ear. “Whats going to happen to me? Oh, Bear, Im just a little guy! Im not big like you! Whats going to happen to me?” He was sobbing by the time he finished, clinging to me, wrenching my shirt, my hair, my skin, my insides.

I couldnt speak. I wanted to quickly reassure him, comfort him, make him understand that I would be there, no matter what, but the words wouldnt form. They wouldnt come out. I looked frantically over his shoulder, searching for Anna or Creed but finding Otter, blindly through my tears. He was wiping his own eyes. *No!* I thought angrily. *You can’t be crying! You said you would help me, so you fucking help me! Otter!* Almost as if he heard me, he dropped his hands, and I saw his eyes were red, but he was still in control. I pleaded with him silently. He understood and quickly got up, coming round the table. He hunkered down next to me and the inconsolable Kid and put his hand on Tys back.

“Tyson, I want you to listen to me,” he said quietly, rubbing the middle of Tys back. “Can you do that for a moment? Can you do that for me?” The sobs continued to rack the Kids body, but I felt him nod.

“Look at me, Kid,” Otter said. Ty twisted around in my lap, both his hands still wrapped in my shirt, still clinging. Otter put both his hands on either side of Tys head and used his thumbs to wipe away the tears. “I know its scary,” he continued, after Ty had calmed some. “I know its very scary right now. But you know who is going to take care of you because youre just a little guy?” Ty shook his head. “Bear is. And I am. And Anna and Uncle Creed. And my mom and dad and Annas mom and dad. We are all going to take care of you. If you need anything, you just have to tell one of us, and well do it for you. Okay?” We both nodded because as Otter said this last bit, he looked up at me.

“What about when Bear goes to school?” the Kid hiccupped out. “Hes supposed to go to school soon!” I could hear the panic edging back into his voice. “Do I have to move too? I dont want to move! I like my room! I dont want to leave!”

“You wont have to,” I was finally able to say. “Im not going to go to school right now. We can stay here, and you can keep your room.” He started crying again, this time quietly, lying against my chest. I put my chin on his forehead and rocked him gently. I felt a warm hand on my knee and knew it was Otters and knew I should shake my leg to get it to move, but it was comforting, and it was kind, and I couldnt find the strength to push it away.

Anna and Creed came into sight as they crouched down next to Otter. Otter didnt remove his hand, and I was glad. They both reached out and touched Ty on his face, his leg, his hair.

“Things arent going to be that much different,” Anna said finally. “You are still going to go to school and play with your friends. You can stay in your house and when Bear has to go to work, you can stay with me or Uncle Creed or Otter. I know your mom wont be there, but we all will be. I promise, okay?”

He nodded, jerking his head just once. “What about Uncle Creed? Are you going to stay too? Youre not going to go away to school, too, right?” Creeds shoulders sagged, and he looked up at me with an expression Id never seen on his face before. From that look he told me that he felt he was betraying and abandoning me too. For a second, selfishly, of course, I felt he was. I knew he would go away in the fall, and I would only see him every now and then, and it wouldnt be the same. I pushed those thoughts away, because it wasnt about me right then, it was about the Kid. I could worry about myself later.

“Ty,” I said, choosing the words that followed carefully. “Uncle Creed is going to be here for the next couple of months, but he is going to go to school in August. That wont mean he doesnt love you anymore, its just that he has to go. I know, though, that he would rather stay here with you, but hes got to go. Hes going to be a famous computer guy and get really rich and take us on a trip on his big boat, but to do that, hes got to go to school, okay?” Ty nodded, and Creed looked at me like I walked on water.

“But Im going to come back a lot, okay?” Creed said, sounding like himself. “Youll get to see me all the time, and if you ever want to talk to me when Im not here, you just need to have Bear call me, and we can talk however long you want. Id rather talk to you than take some dumb computer class.”

“Okay,” Ty said sadly. He turned then to Otter. “You said you were going to stay and take care of me too, Otter. Are you going to go away too? Not like

my mom, but like Uncle Creed? Are you only going to visit me sometimes?”

Otter responded without hesitation. “Im not going anywhere, Kid. You can count on that. Im going to stay right here with you and Bear, okay?”

“But, Otter,” Creed interrupted, “what about—”

Otter shot him a warning look, and Creed stopped. I wondered what that was about. I didnt know of Otter having to leave or do anything. I didnt really want to think necessarily of Otter right then but shuddered at the thought of him going away too. Otter was already out of college and was working for a small photo studio in the next county over. It wasnt glamorous, but he seemed to like it. Theyd had a couple of shows for his work that I had gone to. I had walked around with Creed and his parents, sipping champagne, feeling older than I was as we walked from picture to picture. I reminded myself to ask Creed later what was going on with Otter.

As soon as Ty knew where he stood and who was leaving and who was not, he seemed to be placated a bit. He turned back to me and crawled up my chest again. He kept his arms against his sides. I put one arm around his neck, and he nuzzled my neck. A fleeting thought rose in my head—

this is how you and otter were laying

—but I pushed it away before it could take root. I heard the Kid mumbling something against my neck, and I cocked my head to listen. “Say that again, Kid. I couldnt hear you,” I told him.

“I need to go sit in the bathtub. I feel like an earthquake,” he whispered back. I immediately stood, carrying Ty. I heard Anna and Creed explaining to Otter what Ty had meant, and nobody followed, and I was fine with that. I carried Ty to the closest bathroom and climbed into the bathtub and sat down, my back to the edge opposite the faucet. I stretched out my legs, and Ty lay against my chest, his eyes glassy and listless.

When Ty had been four, he had been watching TV and had seen some show on earthquakes or tectonic plates or something that had ingrained itself into him. Even at that age he wasnt watching cartoons like normal kids. On the show, he told me later, they said that in the event of an earthquake, you needed to get some place safe. One of those places is the bathroom, in the tub. Ever since then, whenever Ty has gotten scared, upset, in trouble, mad, or any other range of emotion that was anything other than happiness, he would go sit in the bathtub until he felt better again, saying he wanted to feel safe from his earthquakes. My mom used to try and get him to stop, until one day I told her to just leave him alone. She did, telling me fine, she would

leave him alone, but I would have to deal with him when he got like that. So we sat in the bathtub, feeling the world shifting between our feet. Eventually he quieted and fell asleep on my chest, his hands still wrapped up in my shirt. In there, we were safe. Out there, the world shook and everything was breaking apart.

So THATS how it went. Thats how she left. Thats how I reacted. Thats

how we told Ty. Thats how I made the only choice I *could* make. I turned eighteen and gained a child. A few days later Creed, Anna, and I graduated from high school. Both Annas parents and the Thompsons were told about what happened. We got them together to tell them so it would not have to be repeated, and I was proud of my friends as they stood united with me against their parents protestations. Eventually, we got them to agree to allow me to take care of Ty and not try to find our mom or call the cops or anything like that. Of course, this was only made on the condition that I accept their help and ask them for anything if it was needed for either Ty or myself. Otter, Creed, and Anna all kicked me underneath the table when I hesitated, and I said yes. I knew their parents were going against their better judgment, but I think that they were told of my threat to take Ty and leave if they ever did anything, so they did nothing.

As promised, the power of attorney arrived two days after my birthday, brought to me by my mothers friend Denise. As promised, it had already been notarized. All I had to do was sign my name on the empty line below. I stared at the little sheet of paper for what felt like hours, tracing my moms signature with my finger over and over again. It felt like I was signing my life away, agreeing to something that wasnt fair to anyone involved. But in the end, what choice did I have? I signed the power of attorney, and Creed and Anna tried to make a big deal about it, saying it was cause for celebration. I shook my head and stood out on our apartment balcony, staring out into the parking lot. Otter came out a moment later and stood next to me, never speaking but bumping my shoulder every now and then to let me know he was still there. That was all I needed.

It turned out that the \$137.50 that was in the envelope with the damned letter was all that our mom had left us. Id had more than three thousand saved in that account from working, saving up for when I was supposed to go away

to school. It was the final slap in the face from my mother. Much to my annoyance, however, Creed or Anna or Otter had gotten my banking information and somehow that money was magically replaced into the account. I knew it was one of their parents who had put it there, and I protested it quickly. I was told to shut up and to remember that I had promised to let them help. I didnt say anything further to them except for a humbled thank-you and immediately went to work and requested extra shifts. I vowed to not put them in that position again.

And so thats what happened.

I know, I know. I can hear you asking already: *But Bear, that doesn't explain what happened with you and Otter. That's the whole point of this flashback!* Im getting to that. Im just thinking of what to say. He did do something to me, yes, but Im not talking about anything physical. He did something to my head, and I find thats always the hardest thing to talk about. So why are Otter and I standing in the rain, the Kids soy ice cream half-melted? Why am I clutching at him like Ty did when we told him about our mom? Im doing that because I am afraid hell disappear like he said he wouldnt, that he will abandon me, and I will be alone all over again. But Im not like *that*, okay? Im not like that.

Im not.

ABOUT two weeks after I graduated, I came home from work. It was almost ten oclock at night. I was tired. I found myself being tired most of the time in those days. Theres nothing more draining on a human than a perpetual state of grief and anger. I alternated between the two, trying to keep it bottled up so no one would see just how bad I was. I let myself into our apartment and saw Mrs. Paquinn sitting on the couch, Ty lying asleep with his head in her lap.

Mrs. Paquinn is our next-door neighbor. Shes in her seventies but is quicker in the mind than most people I know. Whenever we needed a babysitter, shes always more than willing to watch Ty, no questions asked. She lives alone and has done so for the last thirty years, her husband having died from a heart attack at an impossibly young age. Shes always fond of telling me that he hung on for two weeks afterward, too stubborn in this life to move onto the next. I knew that shed had a daughter who had also passed away, but that was when she was very young. Shed said that God saw fit to bless her with one but that she was too precious, and so He took her right back. When I first heard that, it made me think that God was a possessive

bastard.

I had finally worked up the nerve to tell her what happened, thinking she would show pity and feel sorry for me like everyone else had. I even thought she would cry a little bit. But she did nothing of the sort, telling me that I was brave for what I was doing and that I reminded her of her Joseph, who had been her husband. She told me never to worry about asking for help with the Kid, that she would always watch him when I needed. We had always paid her before, as she lived on a fixed income, and I made sure that this did not change. The first time I'd done so, I could see her ready to protest, but there must have been something in my eyes because she looked at me for the longest time and then took the money without question. At least in that, I felt some kind of normalcy.

I walked in the apartment and thanked her softly for watching Ty for me. Anna had also been at work, and Creed and Otter had had some kind of family dinner that they had to go to. Mrs. Paquinn had agreed immediately to watch Ty when I'd asked her the day before. She rose slowly from the couch, moving gently to not wake Ty. I paid her, and she hugged me as she always did, and I led her to the door, waiting until I saw she had gotten safely into her apartment next door before I closed my door.

I went back to Ty and picked him up. He woke briefly, and saw that it was me carrying him and went back to sleep in my arms. Mrs. Paquinn had already gotten him into his pajamas, so I put him into his bed and pulled the covers over him, kissing the top of his head as I turned off the bedroom light. I left the door partway open so the light from the living room would act as a nightlight. I tried a few days ago to move into my mom's old room now that it was available. That had led to a freak-out on Ty's part. I learned quickly that he knew I had to leave him sometimes for work and such, but when I was home, I was expected to continue on in the way we had done before Mom had left. That meant sleeping in the same room. He didn't care if we slept in our room or in the other bedroom, as long as we were together. We chose to stay in our room, even though it was smaller. Mom's room still smelled like her. It was too much, too soon.

On that night, however, that was far from my mind. That night was one of the nights that I'd found myself, frequently in those days, depressed, angry, feeling sorry for myself. I knew I wouldn't be able to sleep. I made the decision at work that I wanted to be drunk. I knew that there's nothing worse for depression than drinking by yourself, but I didn't give a shit. My mom had

left a bottle of Jim Beam in one of the cupboards. It was nasty, thick, and cloying, but it numbed me quickly, especially since I was drinking it directly from the bottle. Shortly, I found myself drunk and in a worse state than when I'd begun. A shadow crossed my heart, and I made my way to the bathtub, tremors rolling through my body. I took the bottle with me. I was upset. And drunk. And I wanted to talk to someone. Badly.

I picked up my phone to call Anna or Creed and dialed Otter instead.

He answered on the fourth ring. "Thank God you called. This dinner is still going on, and I have to tell you, my extended family is insufferable. Thanks for giving me an excuse to get away."

"My extended family sucks too," I said, trying to make a joke, but it came out as *Myyy tendin famries fluck toa*.

Otter sounded amused. "I take it that the Kids asleep, and you decided to partake in a little self-indulgence?"

"Yesh," I slurred. "Irve freaking *earned* thissss."

"Theres no denying that. Where are you?"

"In the tub. Theres *quakes*, and I needed to be safe," I stated irrationally.

"You okay?"

"No. Come over."

"Okay." No hesitation.

"Youre eating family with your dinner. I dont want to mess that up." He snorted. "Screw em. Creed can keep them happy. Ill be there in fifteen minutes."

A warning bell went off in the back of my head. "No, its okay," but he had already disconnected.

I tried to get up, to do what, I dont know. I only succeeded in hitting my head on the soap dish that outcropped from the shower wall. I decided I was in no condition to even be *thinking* at that point, much less having Otter over, with everything that had been going on. I looked stupidly down at my phone, wondering how I had gone from wanting to call Creed or Anna to having Otter on his way over while I was hammered. I threw my phone into the hallway, where it bounced off the carpet into the wall. I reached over and turned on the shower and sat there as the cold water fell on me, willing myself to become sober. My clothes quickly became soaked and clung against my skin. I pulled my knees to my chest and wrapped my arms around my legs and shivered.

I was startled out of a daze sometime later when Otter walked into the

bathroom. He was wearing a suit and tie, and I wondered why he had gotten so dressed up to come to my house. I wondered why I was still sitting in the shower, my skin numb and teeth chattering. I wondered why I noticed that Otters tie matched his eyes almost perfectly. He leaned against the bathroom doorway, big arms crossed against his chest, head cocked to the side as if he was trying to figure out just what the hell it was that I was doing. I felt like I needed to explain.

“I got scared,” I said stupidly as I gestured around me. “This is the only place thats safe when everything quakes.” He didnt say anything; instead, he left the doorway and climbed into the bathtub with me, suit and all. He sat down next to me, our knees knocking together gently. He reached over to the faucet and flipped it until the water grew warm. I looked over at him, eyes wide.

He saw me staring at him and shrugged. “Its only a suit, Bear. And your lips are blue. Whyre you sitting here with the cold water on?”

I looked down at my hands and realized how insane I must have looked when he walked into the bathroom. “I was trying to get sober,” I said, my voice sounding like the Kids.

Otter snorted and lifted the bottle out of my hands. “I bet you were. Why in Gods name would you be drinking this shit?”

“Its all I had. Its all my mom left,” I said, as if it explained everything. “Well, then, this wont be so bad,” he said as he leaned forward and dumped the rest of the bottle into the toilet. I started to protest but thought better of it when he shook his head.

“Fine,” I said. “I didnt want any more anyways.” I put my head on my knees, finally starting to feel warm again. We sat for a bit, not talking, and that was okay. The shower was too loud to be able to talk properly, but it was good just to have someone there. I was conscious of his presence, his knee knocking against mine every so often, and I took comfort from it. I felt the world slowly right itself, and when I was sure the earthquake was over, I got up and reached over Otter and turned off the water. I got out of the bathtub and handed him a towel.

“Better?” he asked as he took off his suit coat and tie. He rubbed the towel over his face and hair.

“Yeah. You didnt have to come over, Otter.”

“I know.”

“And now youre all wet.”

“Youre very observant when youre drunk.”

“Whyd you come here?”

“You asked me to. Whyd you call me?”

“I dont know,” I said truthfully.

“I dont know, either, Bear. But Im here now. And yes, I am soaking wet, as are you. Can I borrow some shorts and a shirt or something? We cant stay in these clothes.”

My mind took that the wrong way, and I felt an aftershock course through me.

He followed me to my bedroom, where Ty was still asleep. He waited in the doorway while I grabbed some clothes for him. I tossed him an old shirt and some cargo shorts. He walked away, and I heard the bathroom door shut. I hoped he hadnt notice how my hands were shaking. I told myself it was because I was cold. I felt like a liar.

I quickly peeled off the wet clothes and used the towel to wipe down my chilled skin. I pulled on a pair of jeans and a shirt. I quickly found out I was still drunk when I couldnt figure out how to work the zipper on my pants and my shirt ended up on me inside out and backward. I cursed softly.

I walked out of the bedroom, making sure to leave the door partway open again, and went into the living room, where Otter was already sitting on the ugly couch. My clothes seemed to fit him better than they did me. The shirt was stretched tight against his chest and shoulders. The sleeves strained against his arms. I wondered drunkenly what would happen if I made him angry; I bet I wouldnt like him when hes angry. I felt my mouth go dry and chose to sit in a chair opposite him instead of on the couch next to him, trying to get the image of Otter as the Hulk out of my head.

I didnt know what to say so I said nothing. He didnt say anything, either, and in my mind it became a contest to see who could hold out the longest before speaking. My drunken mind found this fascinating, at least until my drunken mouth opened and said, “I cant do this, Otter.”

“You cant do what, Bear?”

“I dont know. Dont listen to me. Im drunk and not making sense.” “What cant you do, Bear?” he repeated, and I swore at him in my head.

“I cant... I cant take care of Ty,” I said, thinking Id meant to say something else but not knowing what it could possibly be.

He sighed. “Dont take this the wrong way, but you really dont have a choice in the matter. You have to.”

"Its not fair."

"No, its not."

"I cant do it, Otter."

"Yes, you can."

"Were you going to leave?" I said abruptly.

This took him by surprise, and he recoiled as if Id slapped him. "What?"

"Back when we told Ty that Mom had left, the Kid asked you if you were staying, and you said you were, and Creed said something. I dont remember *what* he said, but it made me think that you had plans to leave."

He shook his head but didnt say anything. "Were you?" I insisted, suddenly needing an answer from him.

"It doesnt matter, Bear," Otter said quietly, looking away from me. "Yes, it does. You dont need to stay because of us."

"Us?" he asked, arching an eyebrow.

"Me and Ty."

He shrugged. "I told you both I would."

"Dont sacrifice anything for us, Otter," I said, feeling anger ignite in my stomach. "I have to do that enough myself already, so dont you do the same."

He didnt say anything back.

"Where are you going to go? Is it for work?"

He shook his head.

"No? No, what? It wasnt for work?" I pushed, an edge in my voice. "Then what was it for? What were you going to do? When were you going to tell me?"

"Im not...", he started then sighed.

"Dont be stupid, Otter. Answer the damn question. When are you leaving?"

"Bear," he said, his voice in that low warning tone. Usually it shut me up. Usually I stopped talking. But whether fueled by alcohol or rage, I couldnt drop it. I couldnt leave it alone.

"Why wont you tell me?"

"Bear, just leave it alone!" Otter got up and started pacing back and forth.

"Fuck you. I wont! Tell me!"

"Im not going anywhere!"

"Why not!" I shouted, not caring if the Kid woke up.

He stopped pacing, and his eyes flashed at me. "If you dont know already, then theres no point in telling you," he spat at me.

I jumped up from my chair and stood in front of him, glaring up into his face.

He scowled down at me, his eyes unflinching. I had never been that close to his face before and saw flecks of gold in the green of his eyes that I never knew existed. I wondered just how drunk I was because I felt my hands come up, and I knew I was going to punch Otter in the face or shove him to the ground. What I didnt expect was my hands to wrap around the back of his neck and slide gently up to his hair, still wet from the shower. What I didnt expect was for my hands to pull him toward me. What I didnt expect was for his lips to meet mine, a grunt of surprise pouring from his mouth. What I didnt expect was how warm he tasted and how good it felt and how I could tell when he got over his initial shock because he started to kiss me *back*, and my blood boiled, and I was electrified, and the whole universe shook to its core. Then I realized what was happening, what I was *doing* and who I was doing it *with*, and I froze as Otters hands trailed their way to my waist. As soon as his hands touched my hips, I jumped back, finding myself almost on the other side of the room.

“Oh my *God*,” I moaned out loud as my stomach cramped, and I bent over from the pain of it. “Oh my *God*.”

And so thats how it happened. Thats how I ended up kissing my best friends big brother; Otter, who I had known for practically my entire cognizant life. Crazy, right? Especially since Im *not* like that. I dont know how it happened or why it happened or anything, okay? It just did. I remember stumbling away from him, and I muttered apologies, telling him I was drunk, and I didnt know what I was doing and thats not who I was and how I just needed to go to sleep and if he could just leave, and I would call him later. While babbling at him, I never met his eyes. My head was dizzy, and I felt sick to my stomach. I was almost to the couch and asking him incoherently if he wouldnt tell Creed or Anna when the room started to spin. I lay down on the couch and saw him walking toward me, a concerned look on his face, and before I was gone, I remembered how his hair had felt under my fingers, wet and soft.

SOMETIME later, I thought I had a dream. I dreamt that Otter had picked me up from the couch, carrying me in his arms. He took me to my bedroom and put me in my bed, pulling the comforter up to my chin. He sat on the bed beside me and rubbed my hair and caressed my cheek. I tried to talk to him, but my mouth felt full of cotton, and I couldnt speak. I felt the bed shift as he stood, and he leaned over me and kissed me on the forehead. Before he pulled away, his lips came near my ear, and he said, “Im sorry. I hope youll be able to

forgive me one day.” I wanted to tell him it was okay even though I didn’t know what he was talking about. But he was already gone.

“B_{EAR}, get up!” the Kid said into my ear.

I groaned and squinted my eyes open, hissing at the light as it stabbed its way into my head. I turned my head and saw Ty peering down at me from his perch next to my bed. As soon as I moved my head, jagged pain shot through it, causing my stomach to ripple.

“Are you sick?” Ty asked me.

“Yes,” I said hoarsely. “Why’d you wake me up? What time is it?”

The Kid glanced over at the clock on the nightstand that separated our beds. “It’s still in the morning. I was watching TV, and your phone rang, and it said Creed, so I answered it. He sounds mad and said he wanted to talk to you.” I then noticed he was holding my cell phone in one of his hands, and I remembered what had happened the night before. My breath caught in my throat, and I almost told Ty to hang up the phone and then throw it on the ground and step on it. Then I would pack a bag for him and me, and we would get in my car and drive to Canada, where no one would know that I had kissed a guy the night before. *Did Otter tell him?* I panicked. *Did Otter tell Creed I fucking kissed him?* Ty held out the phone and put it into my outstretched hand.

“I’m going to go watch TV,” Ty said as he walked out of the room. I put the phone to my ear. “Hello?”

“I’m going to fucking kill him!” Creed raged into my ear.

“Kill who?” I asked, not wanting an answer.

“Otter! I can’t believe he’d do this!”

“What?”

“He’s gone!”

My heart skipped a beat. “Wait, what? What do you mean he’s gone?”

Creed started shouting into the phone: “I woke up this morning, and he was packing up his car with all his shit. I asked him what he was doing, and he said he had taken that job in San Diego after all. He said it was better this way! Can you believe this? I mean, how could he do this to Ty, man? He told Ty he was going to stay here, and now it’s just going to mess up the Kid even more! He’d said he had turned that fucking job down to stay here!”

“He’s gone?” I repeated, my mind too numb to think of anything else.

“As of an hour ago. I asked him what Ty was going to think? What *you* were going to think by him not saying anything to you guys, and he wouldn’t

answer me.”

“Oh.”

“I know, right? I mean, *what the hell!* „Better this way? What does that even mean? I want to know why he did this. He left that dinner last night, and something happened because when he came back home, he was acting really weird. He wouldn't tell me where he was going, but he was wearing different clothes when he came back.”

“He was?”

“Yeah and, well, okay, I have to tell you something, and you have to promise this stays between us. This is some serious shit, Bear.”

“I promise.”

I heard Creed take a deep breath. “Otters gay. He came out to my mom and dad and me a few months ago. I didn't tell you because I read on Wikipedia that the coming-out process is different for everyone, and they have to do it on their own. I don't give a shit, but my parents were kind of weird about it, and there were some bad vibes around here for a while.”

“Oh,” I said.

Creed sounded exasperated. “Bear, did you hear what I just said? *Otter's gay.*”

“I heard you,” I said, sounding annoyed.

“And all you have to say about it is „oh? What the hell?”

“What do you expect me to say?”

“I don't know. Whatever. I think that Otter was seeing someone and something happened last night, and they broke up or something. That's why he came home all sad and retarded, and then he left. Has he said anything to you about some guy or something? When was the last time you talked to him?”

“A couple of days ago, when he called to talk to Ty,” I lied and in my head I felt Otters lips upon mine again. “I've never heard him mention anyone before.”

“Well, shit. But Ty! What the hell is this going to do to him?”

“I don't know,” I said, suddenly angrier than the situation should have warranted. And if I was being honest with myself, the anger I felt at my mother leaving didn't even compare to Otters exit. He'd made a promise to Ty to stay here and help him. Otter had promised *me*. Did my kissing him really screw him up so bad that he had to leave? Did he really feel the need then to give the Kid another reason to not trust anyone ever again? *You son of a*

bitch, I thought. *You goddamn son of a bitch.*

“Dude, Im coming over. I cant deal with this shit here right now. My mom is crying and my dad is pissed off, and I really should be there when you tell him so he can hear it from me too.”

“Okay,” I said through gritted teeth, and I closed the phone. My headache was even worse. My hands shook with anger.

I got up and closed the bedroom door and got back into my bed. *I’m sorry,* hed said in what I thought had been a dream. *I hope you’ll be able to forgive me one day.*

Burying my face into the pillow so Ty wouldnt see my face, I started to drown.

WE TOLD Ty, and of course it broke his heart, and he didnt understand why Otter had left. We told him it was nothing he had done, but Ty was past any kind of consolation by then. After that, Ty changed. He began to ask me for exact times when I would be back from work or wherever I went. If I was going to be late, I needed to call him and let him know. The bathroom thing started that I told you about earlier, where I would be expected to stand in the same spot that I was in when he went in. In short, he stopped trusting everyone.

We had good days, and we had bad days, and there were also days when it felt like we lived above a fault line because everything would seem to shake apart at the seams. That bathtub saw a lot of use between Ty and myself, just sitting in there, trying to calm ourselves down. One night, after a particularly bad day, I got stuck behind an accident on my way home from work. Thats also when my cell phone battery just happened to run out. You know, the basic perfect storm. Needless to say, I got home twenty minutes late. The Kid was already in full freak-out mode by that point, and it took me five hours to finally get him calm enough to take a breath. I put the phone charger in my car the next day and have never taken it out.

During the next year and a half, Creed would give me updates as he would talk to Otter every now and then. I never asked for them, but I was told anyway. Apparently he was doing really well with the new studio he was working in and becoming quite renowned for his photography. I felt bitter for a while, and then I just stopped feeling anything. Otter tried calling me a few times, but I didnt pick up the phone, and he didnt leave any messages. Ty would talk to him every now and then when he was with Creed or Anna. I never asked him what they talked about, and he never told me.

I never told anyone about the loneliness that seemed to be clawing at my insides. I thought it weird, at least at first, that I would even have any *time* to feel lonely. But there were nights, long after Tyson had fallen asleep, when there was nothing to do until it again became light outside, that I wrestled with this gaping hole that had been torn open inside of me. I knew I couldn't fully blame Otter for this; after all, my mom was the one who started it all. But I couldn't help but lump them in the same category: People I Depended On Who Fucked Me Over. I figured the sooner I put them behind me, the easier it would be.

It almost worked.

I didn't see Otter again for eighteen months. I thought I was okay with it. But when he showed up out of the blue, the wound reopened and started bleeding anew, and it was like everything was crashing down all over again.

The Kid and I went to the Thompsons for Christmas Day like we had done the year before. We were all sitting in the living room, watching as Ty opened the mounds of presents that Creeds parents had given him. We were all laughing as the Kids smile got wider and wider with each present. I was thirsty and offered to get everyone something to drink. Mrs. Thompson offered to help, but I shook my head and said I would take care of it.

I was in the kitchen when the door opened and in he strode, his hair slightly longer, his frame slightly thinner, but still grinning that crooked smile. He looked around the kitchen, and then his eyes fell on me, and he dropped the bag he was carrying, and without a word he moved quickly across the distance between us and pulled me into his arms. It all happened so quickly that I was sure I had hallucinated the whole thing until I realized that he still *smelled* like Otter. I put my arms up to hug him back but remembered the last time I had held him so: his mouth had been pressed against mine, my body made of live wires.

I pulled away and walked out into the living room, but not before I saw the hurt in his eyes.

He stayed for a week. I let Ty see him but always made it so Anna or Creed picked the Kid up from our house and took him over. I never saw him the rest of the time he was there. I didn't trust myself around him. He never made any attempts to get in touch with me that I know of while he was there, save one. Ty had come home on New Years Day after I got out of work, desperately needing the time and a half for working the holiday. The Kid had spent the day with Creed and Otter over at their house. Ty said that Otter had

dropped him off and then left, going back to San Diego. My heart and head felt heavy, but there was nothing I could have done about it. I wanted to talk to Anna, to hear another voice, and realized I left my phone in the car. I told Ty I would be right back, after reassuring him it would only take a minute.

I walked toward my car, thinking about how good it felt that Otter was gone again, a weight lifted from my shoulders. It took convincing, but I was almost able to believe it. I got closer to my car and saw a piece of paper stuck under a windshield wiper. Thinking it was a flyer for a restaurant, I picked it up and was about to crumple it in my hands when I saw familiar handwriting:

I know you were hurt and have every reason to be angry, but just know that there hasn't been a day that has gone by that I haven't thought about you and Ty. Maybe that's my punishment, knowing you are doing well and knowing I had nothing to do with it. For what it's worth, I'm proud of you, for having done so great despite people breaking their promises to you.

It was good to see you, even if it was only for a moment. I am glad I got at least that. I've missed you, Papa Bear.

It wasn't signed, but it didn't need to be. I folded it gently and put it in my wallet.

"Where are you here?" I moan. "Why did you come back?"

He grabs me by the chin, forcing me to stare into his eyes. "It has nothing to do with what happened between us. As far as I am concerned, that was a mistake. We never should have kissed."

I attempt to squirm away, but it's halfhearted. I try not to look at him, but he still holds me by the chin. There are still gold flecks in his green eyes. "Is that why you left?" I say, trying to smooth out my voice. "Because of... that?"

He shakes his head. "It wasn't just that, Bear." He lets go of me and takes a step back. "There were a lot of things that were going on, and I didn't know what else to do." He looks at me, his eyes pleading. "You have to believe me when I say that if I could go back and do things differently, I would."

"Three years," I retort.

His jaw tightens. "I know. You don't have to remind me. It's just that," he starts but then stops, appearing to think over what to say next. "I know this is going to sound stupid, but I thought that I was influencing you somehow, and I didn't think that it was fair. I didn't think you needed that on top of everything else. I'm not trying to make excuses, just trying to make you understand."

"What do you mean, influencing me?"

He grimaces. "Bear, I was just coming out myself. My parents weren't taking it well and then the whole thing with your mom.... You needed people who were going to be able to be strong for you. I thought I could do that. But then that night happened, and I realized just how really weak I was. You were drunk and hurting and needing a friend, and then we kissed, and I realized I couldn't be the stronger one. I thought that I was somehow pushing myself onto you, and that it was... I don't know, Bear. I thought putting distance between us was the best thing to do at the time." He looks miserable. "Is any of this making sense?" he asks me.

"I'm not gay, Otter. I don't care if you are, but I'm not."

He hangs his head. "I know, Bear. I'm okay with that."

"How long are you staying for?"

He won't look at me. "I don't know," he says. "For now." "Why'd you come back?"

He shakes his head. "I don't want to talk about that now. Maybe later, okay?"

"Is there even going to be a later, Otter? Or are you just going to sneak away again with your tail between your legs?" It's a cheap shot and I know it, but I'm still angry and can't help myself. I want the words to burn. He winces. "I'll be sure to tell you."

"You do that." I pause, considering. "And just so you know, this doesn't forgive anything. You've got a lot of ground to make up. With Ty, I mean." "I know," he says, finally looking me in the eye.

I walk past him back to the Jeep. The ice cream isn't as melted as I thought it would be, and I look at my watch and see that we only have a few minutes before Ty would start worrying. I turn to tell Otter to get his ass in gear, but he's already getting into the car. I glance over at him and see the letter from my wallet is on his seat. I reach and snatch it back before he can sit on it. Knowing he's watching me curiously, I fold it back up and put it back in its place in my wallet.

"Bear?" he says, the *tick-tick-tick* of the rain beating in time on the roof. I stare out the window. Suddenly, I feel very tired. "What?" "Why'd you keep that?"

"What?"

"You know."

"The letter you wrote me?"

"Yeah."

Because it was the only piece of you I had left, I think. “I dont know,” I say out loud.

Liar, it whispers.

4. Where Bear Throws a Party

W_{E DONT} speak the entire way back. As soon as we get back to the house,

Otter says hes tired and is going to bed. He gives Ty a hug and tells him he will see him very soon. He says good night to Creed, who is putting the Kids ice cream in a bowl for him. He doesnt say anything to me. This does not go unnoticed by Creed. He hands Ty his food and sends him to go watch *The Bovine Holocaust* or whatever its called.

“So I take it you let him have it,” he says, sounding amused. “What do you mean?” I ask wearily.

“Well, lets see. You were gone for almost an hour in what should have been a five-minute trip. You both looked like hell when you came back. And just now, Otter didnt even look at you before he went upstairs.” He grins. “So come on, tell me. You chewed him out for being such a douche bag and moving to San Diego. Right? Please tell me you recorded it. I bet you were absolutely *terrifying*.”

I laugh, despite trying not to. “Something like that.”

“So, whyd he do it?”

“Do what?”

Creed looks at me like Im retarded. “Whyd he leave? Ive never believed him when he said it was because he couldnt handle Mom and Dad anymore. He must have said something to you.”

You needed people who were going to be able to be strong for you. I thought I could do that. But then that night happened, and I realized just how really weak I was. You were drunk and hurting and needing a friend, and then we kissed, and I realized I couldn't be the stronger one. I thought that I was somehow pushing myself onto you, and that it was... I don't know, Bear. I thought putting distance between us was the best thing to do at the time.

“Well?” Creed asks, making a face at the taste of Tys soy ice cream. “No,” I lie. “He didnt really say anything at all.”

“A_{WHAT}?” I say to Creed a few days later. He and Anna are

sitting at the

kitchen table in my apartment. Were trying to put the finishing touches on the Kids surprise birthday party, which is two days away. I read at some parenting website that when you throw a party for kids, you are supposed to give out bags of crappy toys and Tootsie Rolls, so I enlisted their help to help me put it all together after we raided the dollar store near the beach. I dont know why kids need more cheap plastic toys and candy, but who I am to argue with the Internet. “Youve got to be joking!”

“What?” Creed says, looking slightly offended. “I heard hes really good with kids. Our next-door neighbors used him at a party they had.” He looks at Anna for help, but shes looking as horrified as I feel.

I groan. “We are not getting a fucking *clown* for Tys party. How could you even suggest that? Dont you remember when we watched *It* when we were his age?

He grins. “We stayed up until dawn in the sofa fort we built in Otters room. You were such a pussy!”

Anna laughs. “From what I remember, the fort was your idea, and you could never see a clown again without screaming.”

Creed waves his hand dismissively. “I was *nine*. And that clown ate people.”

“I dont know,” I say. “Isnt there something a little off about grown men who dress up like clowns and go to birthday parties? Its seems like something youd see on *To Catch a Predator*. I dont know if I want this birthday party to end up on TV. I dont think the parents would appreciate it.”

He sighs. “Fine. When this party starts to suck, and the Kid is embarrassed because hes having the worst time ever, dont come crying to me when he tells you he wants to come live at my house.”

I snort. “If he says that, you can have him.”

Creed picks up a ring pop and shoves it into a *Scooby Doo* bag. Then his eyes light up. “We could have Otter do it!”

Anna throws a dollar-store toy, and it bounces off his head. “That would be even worse! Besides, Otter would never dress up like a clown. He has at least a little dignity, right?”

Creed scowls. “Hardly. All he does now is mope like a goddamn teenage girl. Anytime Im home, hes in his room with the door locked. Im telling you guys, he got worked over really bad in San Diego. I thought the whole point of having a gay brother was that they were supposed to be all cool and shit. Ive

got a defective gay.”

“Didn’t he have a boyfriend or something?” Anna asks. “I thought he lived with someone.”

“He did,” Creed says. “Jacob or Josh or something like that. He mentioned him a few times. He tells me to mind my own business every time I ask about it now. Naturally, I keep pushing. He’s bound to crack sometime.”

“I’m sure if he wanted to talk about it, he would,” Anna admonishes. “Just leave him alone, and he’ll come around.”

“He better,” Creed warns. “Sad fags are boring fags.”

“Don’t say fag,” Anna tells him. “It’s rude.”

He rolls his eyes as he shoves a Jolly Rancher in his mouth. “He’s *my* brother. Besides, you know what they call us?”

“What?”

He leans forward and whispers, “*Breeders.*”

“Creed,” I say, “you’re a moron.”

“Yeah, what can you do? But seriously, Josh or Jacob messed him up. You guys break up all the time, and you don’t pout.”

“Just because you’ve never had anything long-term in your life, doesn’t mean you can take it out on those that do,” Anna snaps at him.

He scoffs. “I could if I wanted to. But do you know how many easy girls there are at ASU? And that’s just on my *street.*”

“You’re a pig, Creed.”

He smirks at her. “You love it.” He glances at me casually. “Why don’t you talk to Otter?”

“About what?” I mutter, trying to tie a rubber band around a finished party bag.

“You know, about his problems and stuff. For some reason, he’d always listen to you even though your advice was less than stellar.”

The rubber band breaks and snaps against my fingers. Rubbing them, I glare at Creed. “„Less than stellar? I give great advice.”

“You told me that girls like it when we were mean to them!”

“We were in the third grade! And I didn’t tell you to kick Suzy March in the stomach!”

He laughs. “It worked, didn’t it? Six years later she took my budding flower.”

“Creed!” Anna screeches as I laugh.

He smiles and looks like Otter. “Well?” he asks me.

“Well, what?”

“Talk to Otter for me. You havent even seen him since you yelled at him.”

Anna looks at me funny. “When did you yell at Otter?”

“I didnt,” I growl, even though I sort of did. “Creed has it in his head that I told Otter off the night you saw him.” Another rubber band breaks, and I throw it down on the table.

“Did you?” Anna asks.

“No!” I almost shout.

“Whatever,” Creed says. “Anna, you should have seen the way Otter looked when they got back. I swear to God, Otter was about to cry, and Bear looked all pissed off. I dont know why nobody tells me anything anymore.”

“Why tell you when you automatically know anyways?” I retort.

Anna looks at me and then back at Creed. “Would you go get the rest of the stuff from my car?” she asks him. He groans and holds his hands out for the keys. She hands them to him.

“Talk to him, Bear,” he calls out over his shoulder as he heads for the door.

“Someone has to, and its evidently not going to be me. Who else is there besides you?”

Why doesn't he just call Josh or Jacob? I think darkly before I can stop myself. *I'm sure he can talk to him just fine.*

“Bear?” Anna says softly.

“What?”

“Why are you so pissed off?”

“Im not,” I mutter.

“Thats like the sixth rubber band youve broken in two minutes.”

“Theyre shitty rubber bands.”

“What did you say to him?”

I sigh. “I didnt say *anything* to him.”

“What did he say to you, then?”

“Nothing, Anna. Cant we just leave it alone?”

She reaches out and puts her hand on mine. Only when she does this do I see how badly I am shaking. She has to notice. “Hes our friend, Bear. I know he kind of messed up by leaving, but hes our friend. Creeds right: you should talk to him.”

“Why me?” I say, pulling my hands out from underneath hers. “What would I say thats any different than what youd say?”

Anna looks at me pointedly. “Because he listens to you. He always has.”

“Bullshit he does. Hes always done whatever he wants to.”

She sits back in the chair. "You know that's not true."

"Then why'd he leave?" I say, more harshly than I mean to. I feel a bead of sweat drip down the back of my neck. *Get a grip!* I warn myself.

Why'd he leave? the voice whispers. *You told him to! Tell her, Bear. I'm sure Anna would have a wonderful insight into the matter, what with her semester of Psych. Maybe she could even tell you why you've never been able to erase that kiss from your mind. Wouldn't that be fun?*

Anna begins to fill another bag. "I've been thinking about that again. I think Creeds right when he said that there's more to it than we know. The Otter I know wouldn't have let his parents affect him too badly. He could have just moved out. Creed said he'd already turned down that job after he heard about your mom, but two weeks later he's gone? There has to be something else."

I don't answer her.

"Bear?" she asks. I look at her, trying to keep a mask on. She must see something shifting below the surface, because she hesitates. I think that's a good thing, until she opens her mouth anyway, and I feel a low panic bubble right below the surface. "Did you see Otter before he left?"

My mouth is dry. "What do you mean?" I say quickly. "We all saw him all the time before he left."

"That's not what I meant. It's something Ty... told me after he left. I didn't think much of it because of everything else that was going on but..."

"What'd he say?" I asked, not wanting her to answer.

She appears to choose her words carefully before she speaks. "He said... he said that the night before Otter left, he was at your house. He said he could hear you guys arguing. I thought he must have been dreaming or something because you'd said you hadn't seen him that night."

"When did he say this?" *And why didn't I know?*

"I was babysitting him while you were at work, and I asked him if he wanted me to call Otter to say hi. He said no because he knew you were mad at him. He said that Otter wasn't going to come home again because you didn't want him to."

"I..." I don't know how to finish.

There's a beat, a pause, an infinite moment, then, "Bear, did Otter ever try and flirt with you?"

"What?" I say, incredulous. "Of course not! He knows I'm..." My voice trails off weakly.

"He knows you're what, Bear?" she asks gently.

“He knows that I’m not like that!” I say forcefully. “It’s not my fault he left!” Anna winces. “That’s not what I meant, Bear. It’s not your fault or Tys. It’s his. I just didn’t know if you knew more than you were saying.”

“Why would I lie, Anna?” I scowl.

“I’m not saying you are. I just... think Creed is right. I think something else happened.”

“Why don’t you ask Otter, then? It seems like if he had a problem, people should be asking *him* what it was, not me.”

“I did ask him.” *Oh God.*

“And?”

She plays with a ring on her finger. “He said that he just needed to get away.” I get up and go to the fridge, pretending to be thirsty but really hiding the relief that spreads across my face. “There you go,” I tell her, closing my eyes against the cold air flowing from the fridge. I want to crawl inside and shut the door. “What more do you want him to say?”

“I don’t know, Bear!” she says, sounding annoyed. “I want him to feel like he can tell us anything. There’s no reason he had to go through it alone, especially when you needed him to be there.”

I grit my teeth. “I didn’t need him for anything.” I grab a can of soda and close the fridge and walk over to the counter, pulling down a glass from the cabinet.

I feel her arms wrap around me, and she lays her head on my back. I try not to tense, but I can’t help it. She rubs my stomach underneath my shirt. She laughs quietly into my back. “Same old Papa Bear.”

“Yeah, same old me.” I turn and kiss her on the forehead, and I can feel her smiling into my neck. *Maybe now she’ll drop it.*

“He did say one other thing,” she says, and I freeze.

“Oh?” I choke out.

“He said that he’d thought he’d lost his only chance to be happy. He refused to explain it any further. I wonder what he meant by that.”

On the outside, I am flustered. On the outside, I am at a loss for words. *But on the inside, isn’t there something? Something... I can’t quite put a finger on? His only chance? He can’t have meant...*

No matter how hard I try, I can’t finish the thought. It’s in a dark place, a hidden place, and I don’t have the energy to go looking for it. I feel an odd mix of dread surrounding a warmth growing in my stomach. It has a name, but I won’t be the one to name it.

His only chance?

I hear Creed crashing in through the doorway. “Bear! Bear!”

“What?” I call back, relieved by the distraction.

He runs into the kitchen, a panicked look on his face. “Ty just got off the bus!”

“Oh shit,” I mutter and run to the table, starting to shove all the party toys and decorations into the bags they came in. Creed and Anna are laughing as we throw everything into my moms old room, but I see that Anna glances at me curiously every now and then. I wonder if its because she realizes Id never actually answered her question. Id never actually denied having seen Otter before he left.

He said that he’d thought he’d lost his only chance to be happy.

What had he meant by that?

HAVE you ever tried to throw a surprise party for someone? Its nigh fucking impossible to actually have it end up *being* a surprise because sooner or later, the person figures it out. Someone will tell them, or theyll find some kind of evidence, or theyll just see how weird everyone is acting. Then theres the nonchalant way that you have to get rid of them for just a little bit so you can set up for the damn party. You tell them to go do something with someone, and youll meet up with them later. Now try doing this with a kid who has abandonment issues, who clings to you almost every waking second. On *his* birthday.

That said, the Kid was totally surprised.

Wed had birthday parties for him the last couple of years, but this year, I got it under my skin for some reason to want to do something big. Id been saving for four months to make sure I could get everything I wanted. I even got some random magician to come out and do magic tricks (I know, I know. Youre thinking how is that any different than having a clown? Well, a magician doesnt wear face paint and haunt your dreams). We decorated the hell out of Creeds house, and it looked like wed robbed the damn party store. It was a little much, especially when I realized that we had run out of the ten rolls of streamers I had bought. And then there was the fact that pretty much everyone in Tys grade had shown up. There were almost a hundred people in the house when Anna called to tell me they were on their way. Id gotten everyone to park at a church that was down the street. That parking lot had never been that full, not even on Sundays.

I crowded everyone into the entryway and living room in the house. I stood in

front of them, trying to get everyone to be quiet, and caught Otter grinning crookedly at me, watching me trying to shut up forty kids. I made sure no one was looking, and I flipped him off. He chuckled.

So you'll talk to him? Creed had asked me a few days after the conversation at my house.

Can't it wait until after this damn party?

Yeah, but make it soon okay? I'm getting sick of Depressed Otter.

You really think it'll make that big of a difference?

I think it will. I think you need it too.

What do you mean? I had asked, slightly annoyed.

You might be the only one Otter will listen to, but I know for a fact hes the only one you listen to.

I hadn't asked him to elaborate.

So there I stood, waving my arms frantically, wondering why in the hell I had seen fit to invite so many children, being absolutely sure one of them had spilled the beans. I heard Anna and the Kid walking up the front path to the door. I heard Ty preaching to Anna about *something*, and I ran, trying to find a spot to hunker down. I was running past when a hand reached out and snatched mine, pulling me down. Otter almost pulled me down in his lap.

"Oof," I grunted.

"Sorry," he said, not sounding sorry at all.

He didn't let go of my arm, and I only had two seconds to wonder when his hands had gotten so big when the door opened and the house erupted in screaming and chaos. I jumped up, shouting incoherent babble, and noticed the exact second when Otter's arm left mine, and he roared next to me.

Have you ever had that many people yell at you at one time? No?

It's loud.

I saw Ty and Anna both reel back, and she told me later it was like hearing a sonic boom pass overhead when you're least expecting it. Ty almost leapt from his skin, and I knew we'd pulled it off when he went slack-jawed and stared out at everyone. Creed rushed forward and threw him up in the air. Even in mid-throw, I could see him looking around for me, so I went and stood next to Creed, who set him down. The Kid put his hand on the exact spot where Otter had. He tugged at my arm and pulled me down to whisper in my ear above the noise.

"Bear," he said, "is this all for me?"

I ruffled his hair and said, "You bet your ass it is."

Then he grinned, and the past four months of scrimping every cent I could was worth it.

WERE sitting in the backyard, kids all spread across the grass, watching the

Amazing Whats-His-Name pull a rabbit out of his top hat. The kids shriek with laughter, and the parents clap politely, and Creed leans over and hisses, “How is this better than a clown?”

“At least I wont have to count all the children when he leaves to make sure he didnt take one with him,” I hiss back.

He looks at me incredulously. “Did you not see the van he rolled up in? And that fake mustache hes wearing? For Gods sake, Bear, you should probably count regardless.” I punch him in the arm.

The magician takes a bow and promises to be back in a little bit. The kids disperse, and my Kid comes running up to me and launches himself into my arms, talking about a billion things at once. He then wiggles out of my arms and runs with some boys from his class to a jumping castle that Creed had randomly rented. I told him I would pay him back for it. He told me to shut the fuck up.

Anna appears at my arm. “Hey,” I say, putting my arm around her shoulders.

“Hey, yourself,” she says back. “I cant believe you really pulled this off.” I snort. “You mean we pulled this off.”

She looks over at Ty, who is bouncing off the walls of the castle. “Did you see the look on his face? I thought he was going to pass out.” We all laugh as Ty attempts to do a somersault and fails miserably. “Ive never seen him like this before,” she says.

I know what she means. Since the party started, he had been running up and down the backyard, a state of perpetual ecstasy etched across his face. He had come up to me every now and then, but only to tell me about what hed just done before taking off in the opposite direction. He hadnt been at my side for more than a few seconds. I grin as I feel kind of sad at this.

“Its been a while,” I say.

Creed chokes on his drink next to me. I look over as he points to Otter, who is surrounded by kids, all who seem to be trying to climb up on him at once. We can hear him yelling from where we stand as he collapses under a sea of

tiny ankles.

"Its too bad," Anna says.

"What is?" I say distractedly, watching Otter try to right himself when Ty appears out of nowhere and tackles him from behind.

"That hell never have kids of his own. Hed be a good father."

Otter picks up Ty and swings him around by his arms, and the Kid screams in happiness, spinning round and round and round.

Its five hours later, and Im realizing why people dont throw surprise

parties with this many people in attendance. Where before the house had been festive and bright, it now looked like a graveyard where parties go to die. I sigh as I open another garbage bag, the sixth in the last half hour. Creed is grumbling as he picks up a discarded shoe that had somehow been left behind. I swear, though, it has nothing to do with the magician. I counted.

I look in through the window into the living room and see Ty asleep on the couch, surrounded by wrapping paper and gift bags. I dont know how the hell I am going to get all this shit home. I dont know where we are going to put all of it when I do. Im already thinking ahead to next year, vowing to have the party at my apartment, where only a few people can come. This is ridiculous.

"Remind me never to do this again," Creed says, echoing my thoughts. "Where the hell is Anna, and why isnt she helping?"

I shrug. "Probably cleaning up inside," I say, grimacing as I pick up a pile of wet *something* from the ground. I shudder and thrust it into the bag, trying not to think of what it could be.

I walk over to the table and start putting cups in the trash when I hear Creed walk up beside me. "You did a good job, Bear," he says quietly. "The Kid is going to remember this forever."

"He better," I say, sitting down in a chair with a groan.

Creed eyes me. "I mean it, Bear. Im proud of you." He shakes his head. "I dont know if I could be doing what you are if I was in your position."

"Yeah, well, I didnt think I could either, if it makes you feel any better," I say wearily.

"I guess. Still..." He trails off.

"Why are you being all touchy-feely?" I ask him suspiciously. "What do you

want?”

He jerks his head over his shoulder, and I lean over to look around him and see Otter standing by the jumping castle, tossing more shit into a garbage bag.

“Now?” I whine. “Im so fucking tired, and theres so much more shit to do.”

He waves me off. “Screw it. Itll be here tomorrow, and I doubt youre going to get Ty to move off that couch until then, so you might as well just stay here tonight. I think Ill go ask Anna if she wants to start getting drunk with me so I can take advantage of her.” I throw a cup at him as he walks away.

“You owe me,” I call after him, and he flips me off, going inside and shutting the door. I look back over at Otter as he ties off a garbage bag and starts looking around at the ground for another one. Theres a fog rolling in off the ocean, and its starting to get cold. I sigh dejectedly and stand up and stretch, feeling like Im going to war.

“Hi,” I say as I walk over to him.

“Hey, Bear,” he says. “Great party.”

“Thanks. You looked like you were having fun.”

He frowns. “Ill probably feel it in the morning. Having twenty children dogpile you is a good way start to feel your age.”

I laugh. “I bet. If it makes you feel better, even I felt old today.”

He rolls his eyes. “So much better. Thank you, Bear. Im what, only eight years older than you?”

“Someones got to be the old man around here.”

“Might as well be me, right?”

“Right.”

“So,” he says.

“So,” I say.

“What do Anna and Creed want you to talk to me about?” I startle at this.

“Huh?”

He snorts. “Creed isnt exactly the master of subtlety. Cmon, Bear, you should know this by now. What did he say to me a few days ago? „You keep feeling sorry for yourself, Otter. You just keep on being a fag. Wait until I sic Bear on you again, then well talk,” he says, doing an eerie imitation of his younger brother. “You havent said two words to me since after you left last week, yet here you are.”

I curse under my breath. I look out over the back fence of their property and can see the ocean. Its getting foggier by the second, and I shiver. Seagulls

caw. I can hear the waves crashing down on the beach. "I've been thinking," I say finally.

He arches his eyebrow. "About?"

"I guess what you said that night."

He sighs. "I wondered if you would. You have a tendency to overanalyze everything."

"Whatever." We bend to pick up more trash. He holds the bag open in front of me as I shove paper plates in it. I avert my eyes to try and focus elsewhere, but I know we are heading toward dangerous ground, ground where theres little to no footing. I begin to think this was a bad idea.

You might be the only one Otter will listen to, but I know for a fact he's the only one you listen to, Creed says in my head.

He said that he'd thought he'd lost his only chance to be happy, Anna whispers.

Maybe Otters right, maybe I *do* think too much about things. But I wouldn't have gotten this far, I wouldn't have gotten Ty this far, had I not. I marvel again how people don't seem to understand. It's not their fault, I know, because they've never been in my position before. Being overanalytical is the only way we could have survived. I try to curb the irritation that's rising in me. This conversation isn't supposed to be about me. This is supposed to be about him.

"You think too much, Bear. You always have," Otter insists, as if reading my thoughts. "It's not a bad thing. It's just who you are."

"Gee, thanks."

"Don't take it the wrong way. I do the same thing."

"Yeah?" I say. "Maybe you should work on that."

He looks at me, an amused annoyance splayed out across his face. "Since when did you get so mouthy?"

"You've missed a lot, Otter. Maybe you should stick around for while this time."

"Bear—" he starts.

"You really think you're getting too old now?" I interrupt him, an idea forming in my head.

"I guess."

"Too old to get into the jumping castle?"

He laughs and looks surprised at the sound. He glances up at the looming deathtrap that Creed has on reserve until tomorrow morning. "I don't know,

Bear. Ill probably end up popping it.”

“Stop being such a pussy,” I say, a note of challenge in my voice. He looks me up and down, and we both know he could squash me in a heartbeat. He drops the garbage bag and throws his hands up into the air and starts kicking his shoes off.

“There you go, old man. Thats better,” I say as I slip off my own shoes. He grumbles something threateningly at my person and walks over to the entrance, peering inside. I see him start to change his mind, so I put my foot on his ass and push as hard as I can. I hear him grunt as he falls face-first into the jumping castle.

I climb inside, and its dark, and I cant see him, and then he grabs my arm in the same spot that hed done earlier, and I almost have time to form a thought, whatever it might be, but then he throws me across the castle, and I bounce off the wall and land on my back. He moves quickly and jumps right next to me, causing me to lift in the air and fly into the wall again, all the while, a great bellowing laugh pouring from his mouth, reverberating through the tiny confines of the plastic castle. I get up and glare at him, and he covers his mouth and snickers.

“You should see your face right now,” he says through fits of laughter. “Its so fucking priceless. You look like—” But thats all he gets out as I run silently toward him and tackle him around the midsection, putting the full force of my shoulder behind it. I think Ive won whatever it is that Im trying to win, but everyone knows jumping castles are unfair. As I drive him into the wall, my socks slip on the rubber surface and both feet slide out from underneath me and frantically I try to grip something, but all I have is a handful of Otter, and I pull him down with me. I land flat on my back and only have a second to react before he crashes down on top of me, my head against his chest. I can feel him breathing heavily, and I can hear his heart beating rapidly in his chest. I lay frozen for a moment, willing myself to move, but I cant. I can feel the length of his body resting against me, and its nothing like Anna, the only other person Ive had against me like this. Its strong and hard and smells distinctly male, and a billion things flash at me at once, and I cant breathe, and I cant move, and all I can think about is him being here with me now, and its like the last three years didnt even happen, and its like hes always been here and always been Otter, and Im terrified because I can feel myself growing hard at the weight of him and even though hes only there for a second, it feels like an eternity. Then he tenses as if electrified, and he moves

quickly off of me, and I feel cold and surprised as a singular tear slides down my cheek.

He scampers off into a corner on the opposite side, his face hidden by the shadows. I hear him breathing raggedly, and he sounds feral as he growls at me, "What the hell are you doing?"

I say nothing.

"What do you want from me, Bear?" he barks, sudden and vicious.

"I dont know," I mumble truthfully, not knowing what else to say.

Bear, oh Bear, my mind whispers sadly.

He makes a pained noise and slumps against the wall. "Go back inside, Bear. Go back inside and leave me alone."

I sit up and start to do just that and am at the entrance to the jumping castle when I stop. "What happened to you, Otter?" I ask without turning around. "Whyd you come back home?"

"Not now, Bear," he begs. "I cant do this now. Go away. Just go away."

"No," I say, turning to show him that I am suddenly angry. "No, youre going to tell me, and youre going to tell me now. Ive put up with your bullshit for the last three fucking years and, goddamn it, you owe me."

"Why do you care?" he grumbles.

"Because youre my friend, Otter!" I shout at him, shaking. "Even after all that youve done, even after all of *that*, youre still my friend! I dont have anything else to give you, so you give me something back for once!" My words echo of the walls and dance across my mind. I still cant see his face, but I dont want to move any closer to him. Ive never talked to anyone like Ive talked to him over the last week. If I were him, Id hate me. If I were him, I wouldnt want to talk to me either. I feel shame slowly heating my face, and I feel like I should apologize, but I cant. I *won't*. However wrong I am for saying the things Ive said, at least its been the truth.

"Otter," I try again, my voice softer. "Why wont you talk to me?"

"You said it already, Bear," he tells me flatly. "Youve got nothing left to give, and I certainly know I shouldnt expect any more from you. Youve done enough. I cant expect you to be there for me when I wasnt there for you." He stands, wobbly, and works his way past me, out the front of the jumping castle. I stare stupidly after him.

So that's it, I think dully. That's it. I can't do this anymore.

Hes halfway across the yard before I call out to him. I dont mean to. It just happens. He stops, shoulders slumped. My feet are moving before I realize

Im running after him. I stop a few feet away, and he doesnt turn around.

“What did you mean?” I ask before I can stop myself. “What did you mean, what you said to Anna?”

He sounds dejected. “What did I say to Anna, Bear?”

“You said you felt like youd lost your one chance to be happy,” I tell him, the words falling out of me in a croak. “What did you mean?”

He tenses, and I think hes going to turn around, and I dont know what Ill do if he does, but some part of me, that *secret* part, is willing him to turn, to face me so I can see the look on his face so Ill know if hes telling the truth with whatever he says. Im drenched with sweat and I feel sick to my stomach but *fucking turn around! Look at me! Give me something, goddamn you!*

For a moment it looks like he will, but he doesnt. He walks inside without saying anything.

He walks away from me.

Again.

T_{HAT} night, curled protectively around the Kid, I dream another dream. I walk on the beach. The sky is blue and the water is blue and the sand is blue. Not the blue of day, but the blue-black of the ocean at night.

Sometimes Otter walks with me, sometimes it’s my mom. They don’t say anything, so I don’t either. It’s okay, though; I don’t mind. I like walking on this midnight beach. I know nothing can hurt me here. I’ve fought for this place. It feels like the only fight I’ve ever known.

Otter disappears, and my mom is here in his place. She looks over at me curiously, and I hold out my hand to take hers, but she takes a step back and shakes her head. Then she’s gone, and it’s Otter standing next to me. I offer my hand again, and he refuses it, too, but steps closer to me. I feel his arm brush against mine. He points out to the water, and I start walking toward it, the waves crashing gently onto the beach. I follow him as he breaches the surf. My feet are wet and I stop. I try to call out to him, and I know he must hear me because he turns and holds out his hand, wanting me to be the one to take his. I hesitate, and he sees this, and then he’s gone, and it’s my mom again, wading the shallow waters, beckoning me to her. I take a step back.

And another.

And another.

Otter looks at me sadly. His eyes aren’t the bright green they should be,

but the brown of my mother’s. He hangs his head, and his hand drops to his side. He turns and walks farther out, beyond the break. I know I can’t sit

and watch him drown, but I'm so afraid of drowning with him that I don't follow. The water surrounds his shoulders, and still he moves farther out, and there's a moment, a bright shining break in the night blue, and I run after him, like I always knew I'd do. The water splashes up around me, and it's sticky and heavy, but I don't care. I have to get to him. He hears me coming and turns, and I see his eyes are green again, so beautifully gold and green that I laugh in relief. The water pours into my open mouth, and I am sinking, I am drowning. The surface closes over the top of my head, and I'm gone, gone, gone.

5. Where Bear Learns Several Truths

“You guys arent even going to care that Im gone, are you?” Creed asks me and Anna.

I roll my eyes. “Creed, youre going to Portland for a week. I do without you for months at a time, so I think Ill be okay.” We are sitting outside on a bench at the grocery store. Anna and I are working but taking a smoke break, even though we dont smoke. The principle is the same.

“I wasnt just asking *you*,” he drawls. “Anna, youre gonna miss me, right?”

“I am already counting the seconds until your return,” she says dramatically, putting her wrist against her forehead. “I *pine* for your return, dear Creed.” She gets up, kissing both of us on the head, saying she has to get back before she gets in trouble. She tells Creed not to do anything stupid while hes gone. Some of Creeds friends from Phoenix are coming up to Portland for a week. He invited us to go, but I dont dare take the time off of work, not while I am as ahead as Ive been on the bills in a while. As much as Id love to get the hell out of Seafare for a few days, theres no way the Kid would allow it, and it would be kind of a drag to bring him along. Creed had waved that off, saying Ty could use some debauchery. I had gotten this horrifying image in my head of taking him to a strip club and immediately said no. Besides, he was still in school for another couple of weeks.

I looked down at my watch. “I thought you would have been gone by now.”

He shrugs. “I had some time to kill, and I wanted to swing by real quick before I left. We havent had much of a chance to talk since the party.”

The Kids birthday had been a week and a half ago and during that time, I had not been back over to the house. I had begged off, saying I was working, that I was tired. However true, I didnt want to go back because of *him*. I couldnt get the image out of my head of him walking away from me, the unanswered question still hanging in the air, refusing to die. The dream, that black-blue ocean. I felt the best thing to do would be to put as much distance between Otter and myself as possible until he returned to San Diego. He made it perfectly clear that he doesnt need me, so Ive decided to give him what he

wants. Things get weird when Im around him

I tap the wooden bench with my knuckles. "I told you," I say. "Ive been busy."

"Youre a bad liar, Bear," Creed says with a grin on his face. "You always have been. I guess I shouldnt have forced you to talk to Otter, huh?"

"Is he still shut up in his room?" I ask, trying to sound bored.

"Yep. I think I see less of him now than I did before the party. Maybe it was a bad idea to send the Bear to maul him."

"Keep that in mind next time, will you?" I say. "Ive already got one quasi-depressed person to look after. I dont need another one."

He leans back on the bench. "I dont think well have to think about it much longer. Ive got a feeling hes going to be going back soon, anyways."

My heart skips a beat, and I try not to notice. "What makes you say that?" He glances at his watch. "Just a feeling, I guess. Call it „brotherly intuition. Hes not going to stick around much longer. He can go be depressed anywhere; why stick around here and do it in the rain?"

Good, I think savagely. Good. Go home, Otter. Go home and let me get back to whatever it was I had before you came. At least I was able to recognize myself then. At least I was able to feel right then. At least—

At least what, Bear? it whispers, clearly amused. *At least you were able to go an hour without him occupying your every thought? At least you'd be able to forget that damning hurt you felt as he walked away from you? It's so much easier to hate them when they leave, isn't it? Isn't it?*

"Bear, for Gods sake, pay attention to me!" Creed says, punching me in the arm. "I swear youre worse than Otter sometimes."

"Sorry," I mumble.

"I gotta get going," he says, standing. "Portland pussy is going to wait for no man."

I grin. "I cant wait for the day when you tell me youve got the clap."

He cocks his head to the side. "Thats what you cant wait for? Out of everything in the world, *that's* what you cant wait for? Bear, thats just sad. And very, very mean of you. Just for that, if I do get the clap, I am going to pee in your mouth while you are sleeping, and then you can have the clap with me." He starts grabbing his crotch and moaning, and I laugh and try to get away, but he presses me up against the wall. An old couple walks out of the store and stares at us. He waves at them and says, "Its okay. Were gay. This is my life partner, Greg."

I wince and push him off of me. “Creed, you asshole,” I hiss as the old people walk away, shooting dirty looks at us over their shoulders. “Dont say that kind of shit at my work!”

He sticks his tongue out at me. “Its not like I used your real name, *honey*.”

“Jerk,” I grumble.

“Yeah, you love me. Anyways, Im outs. Ill call you when I get there to rub it in how much fun Im having without you.” He pats me companionably on the back and starts walking away from me. I turn to head inside when he says, “Do me a favor, though?”

I nod.

“Check in on Otter for me at least once? I dont want to have to come home and find out he went all emo and cut himself.” I start to protest, and he drops to his knees and starts screaming in a high-pitched voice, “Pleeeeeeeeeeease, Greg? Pleeeeeeeeease?” I look around, panicky, and tell him fine, to just go away.

“Later, Papa Bear,” he says, and when I turn around again, hes gone.

LATER, Anna and I are spread out on the couch, matching looks of horror on our face while Ty sighs raptly at the TV. Apparently, as part of his birthday present to the Kid, Creed had gotten him the documentary on PETA that Ty had been dying to see. How hed gotten it past me when I was bringing all his loot home was beyond me, until he told me that Uncle Creed made him promise to hide it until he could sit down and watch it with me. Im going to *kill* Creed when he comes home. The movie isnt about just the normal PETA people, no. Its about *hardcore* PETA people. This is some pretty disturbing shit.

“Look at him,” Anna whispers against my chest. “Hes going to be such a hippie when he grows up.”

“Not if I can help it,” I rumble back. “I swear to God, the first time the Kid ends up in jail for freeing a monkey, Creed is going to be the one bailing him out.”

Anna and I try to smother our laughter, but the Kid hears us and shoots us a dirty look. We immediately stop laughing. Theres nothing like being admonished by a nine-year-old ecoterrorist in training. After two excruciating hours, the movie ends, and I tell Ty its time for bed. I can tell he hears me, but instead of getting up and doing what I asked, he turns over on his back and stares up at the ceiling, his face scrunched in such a way that I know hes got something serious on his mind. Anna sees it, too, and knows that we need

to wait for the Kid to speak first. Forcing it out of him never works.

“Derrick?” he finally asks.

“Whats up, Kid?”

He sits up and stares up at us and cocks his head to the side. His demeanor suggests that hes thought about this for a while and is finally ready to ask whatever it is hes been dwelling on. Im reminded of his question about love a couple of weeks ago, when we went to pick up Creed from the airport. Sometimes its refreshing not to know what someone is going to say.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“Is Otter gay?”

Sometimes its refreshing; other times....

My breath hitches in my chest. *What the fuck? I think. Where the hell did he hear that? And why am I stuck with the only nine-year-old in the world who would ask a question like that? Kids aren't supposed to be asking shit that I don't know how to answer!*

Anna evidently knows I am having trouble responding to the inquiry and puzzles, “Why do you ask that, Ty?”

“Its just something Ive been thinking about,” he says honestly. “Is that bad?”

She shakes her head. “Of course its not bad to ask questions, Kid. You can ask anything you want. Itll be up to Papa Bear, though, to decide if youre ready to learn whatever it is youre thinking about. Okay?”

He nods and looks back at me, and I curse Anna in my head. She has made it quite clear that she will not be the one to divulge this, that she will not be the one to affirm. She has left it on me, and I begin to question her motives. Anna sits up and folds her legs underneath her. She looks down at her hands as she waits for me to answer. Sighing, I sit up, too, and slide down from the couch to sit in front of Ty. “Whered you hear this?” I ask him.

He shrugs. “Just one day when I was at Uncle Creeds house.” His eyes go wide as if hed suddenly just thought of something. “I wasnt eavesdropping or anything,” the Kid says quickly.

“I didnt think you were, Kid,” I say. “I just wanted to know if someone told you or if you accidentally overheard it.”

He grins appreciatively at me. “I accidentally overheard Uncle Creed ask Otter about his boyfriend. Otter got mad and told him to shut up.” He pauses

for a moment, as if considering. “Why would Otter be mad about that? Did something bad happen?”

“Honestly, Kid? I dont know,” I say slowly, as I know that Anna is listening to my each and every word too. When Id come back into the house the night of the Kids party, Otter had already gone up to his room and shut the door. Anna and Creed had immediately interrogated me, wanting a play-by-play of *When Bear Attacks*. I wouldnt answer any of their questions directly, much to their chagrin. I told myself that it wasnt my place to say anything, not that I had been told much. I knew I was a liar.

“I thought if you had a boyfriend or a girlfriend,” Ty says wisely, “that you were supposed to be happy and want to talk about them. I dont think Otters boyfriend must have been very nice if he got mad at Uncle Creed just for asking.”

Anna laughs lightly. “Just because you have someone, Ty, doesnt mean you are going to be happy all the time. Sometimes you fight, or the person does something dumb and makes you mad.”

“Like Bear did when he said your nose looked flat?” Ty says, a thoughtful look on his face. I groan as Anna smacks me in the back of the head.

“Yes, Ty, *just* like that,” she says. “Sometimes, people can be a little bit inconsiderate.”

“Or,” I tell him, “sometimes people can be oversensitive and take things the wrong way even if you didnt mean it like that. Usually its girls, and its usually because theyre being hormonal.”

“Whats hormonal?” Ty asks as Anna scowls at me. I shake my head. “Lets not talk about that right now.”

“So Otters gay?” the Kid says, redirecting the topic.

“Yes,” Anna says. “And thats not a bad thing because it doesnt change who he is.”

He looks surprised at her. “Who said it was a bad thing?” he asks, honestly baffled.

Anna ruffles his hair. “No one important. Just as long as you know its not a bad thing and that Otter loves you, then everything is alright.” The Kid looks at me. “Do you think its a bad thing, Bear?” “No,” I say. “Of course not. People can love who they want.”

“Then why were you and Otter fighting that night he left a long time ago?” I hear the words come out of his mouth. I understand them individually but I

don't get them as a whole. I feel the smile on my face slide off slowly. Once again, my little brother has struck me speechless. I know he's waiting for me to answer him, but all I can think of is how I could have been so stupid to the fact that he sees and hears everything.

"That's not what they were arguing about," Anna says before I could speak. I can hear the edge in her voice. My silence might as well be a confession of my sins. I've been so dumbstruck by his words that I've forgotten she's in the room. Warning bells start clamoring in my head, and I don't want this conversation to continue.

"What were they fighting about, then?" Ty asks Anna, and if I was that kind of person, I would strangle him right now.

"I don't know," Anna says evenly. "Bear? Ty wants to know what you and Otter were fighting about. You should tell him."

Oh this is goooood, that voice whispers in my head. *What are you going to say now, Bear? Are you going to coat it with sweet nothings? I mean, how hard could it be to convince the Kid he was dreaming? This could all go away so very, very easily. Or... or are you for once in your miserable life going to be able to tell the truth?* It laughs. *Are you going to be able to say how scared you were because you knew Otter was going to leave but that he was giving it up because of you? Are you going to be able to say that behind that righteous anger you so brilliantly portrayed that you felt some sense of relief? Why did you feel reprieved then? Why, Bear, why? Whyyyyyyyyyyy.... Shut UP!*

"Bear?" Anna says, all steel and knives. Ty hears it, too, and looks at her with concern on his face and then back at me. "Bear?" she says again. "He's waiting."

I take a deep breath and let it out slowly. *Say SOMETHING!* I scream at myself.

Yeah, Bear, it mocks. *Say something.*

"I was mad at Otter," I tell Ty quietly.

"Because he's gay?" he asks me, just as soft.

I shake my head. "I was mad because... I thought he was staying here just because of us, and I didn't think that was fair to him."

Ty squints at me. "But that was his choice, right?" he says, once again sounding more mature than I ever will. "I mean, if Otter didn't want to go away, then why would you tell him to?"

"I don't know, Ty."

Yes, you do.

“Did you *want* him to go away?” he asks me, suddenly suspicious.

“No, Kid. I didnt. But I also didnt want him to stay here just because he... he felt he should.”

“Well,” the Kid says, sitting back on his elbows, “at least he came back. Talking to Otter on the phone isnt the same when you know hes far away.”

“Sure, Kid.”

“So then why are you still mad at him?” he asks me casually, ignoring Anna completely.

“Ty,” I say sternly. “No more tonight. You have school tomorrow, and its time for you to get ready for bed.” He groans and gets up. He walks over to Anna and hugs her, and she whispers something in his ear, and he smiles. I push him along after assuring him I will be in the bedroom to say good night after he brushes his teeth. He walks out of the living room, humming a little song to himself.

I lean back against the couch, unsure of where to go from here. I wish that Ty had waited to have this fucking conversation until we were alone. Better yet, I wish that Ty had never wanted to *have* this fucking conversation. I curb the anger before it can well up because I know that regardless of how smart the Kid is, hes still a kid. This isnt really about him, anyway; its about me. Its about me, and how Id been caught in a lie. Its about the night that I had spent the last three years trying to forget. Its about how that little voice in my head knows exactly where to dig up what Ive been so hell-bent on burying. Its about how theres this girl, this beautiful girl whom I love with all my heart. Its about her because I know that Ive been caught in a net of my own making. I turn to look at her, and I can see her eyes are shiny with tears that have yet to fall. She angrily wipes her face and opens her mouth to speak when Ty calls from the bedroom to tell me hes ready. I curse softly, but dont I practically run out of the room? Dont I just *run*?

The Kids already in his bed when I enter the bedroom. I close the door gently behind us and move over to his bed, sitting down near his legs and leaning back on my hands.

“Is Anna mad at me?” he asks quietly.

I am quick to answer. “No, Kid. Shes not. And I dont want you to think otherwise, okay? She could never be mad at you for anything.” “Are you mad at me?”

I sigh and look over at him. “No, Ty. Im not mad at you, either. Its just been a

long day.”

He's silent for a moment and then says, “I'm sorry I heard you and Otter fighting. I wasn't trying to listen or anything. You were just loud.”

I smile thinly. “Well, then, I should be the one apologizing. I never meant for you to hear that. I didn't mean... for a lot of things”

“Bear?” he says. “Can I tell you a secret?”

“Sure, Kid,” I say, leaning down to put my forehead against his. He smells like Colgate and shampoo, and I want to squeeze my eyes shut and just stay in this moment, but the Kid needs to tell me a secret, and he expects me to look at him when he speaks.

“I don't want Otter to go away again. Is that selfish?” he whispers.

“No, it's not. It means you love him very much, and that will never be selfish. Can I tell you a secret?” He nods and looks up into my eyes.

“What's yours, Bear?”

“I don't want Otter to go away again, either.”

He throws his arms around me and pulls me down to him. “I know. I know. And I'll keep your secret if you keep mine,” he whispers in my ear. I nod into his shoulder, fighting to keep my emotions in check. I stay wrapped in his little arms until he releases me a few moments later. “I love you, Papa Bear,” he says, kissing my cheek.

“I love you too, Kid.”

I get up and turn out the light, closing the door partway behind me, leaving it open just a crack, like I always do. I lean against the wall for just a moment, my breath hitching in my chest. I feel lightheaded and want nothing more than to turn back around and crawl into bed with him and go to sleep. But Anna's still in the living room, waiting for me to come back out. I can't keep her waiting any longer.

She's sitting where I left her. I can see the tears have dried from her eyes, but her resolve is still firm. There's no way this is going to just be dropped like some small part of me hopes. As soon as I walk into the living room, she jerks her head to the side, motioning to the small balcony that is attached to our apartment. I follow her, knowing she doesn't want the Kid to hear what is said. But if she starts yelling, I'll start yelling, and it's not going to matter because the whole goddamned neighborhood will hear us. I shove my hands in my pocket and follow her out, and she shuts the door behind me and picks a spot that is as far away from me as she could possibly be and still technically be considered in our apartment.

“Well?” she asks, her voice low and dangerous.

“Well, what?” I say, stalling. I meet her eyes nervously and shrug. “You lied to me, Bear.”

“Im sorry.” And I am. More sorry than shell ever know.

“Why did you?”

“Anna...”

“No!” she hisses, her eyes flashing. “What happened to you that night?

Why did Otter leave? What did you do to him?”

I laugh harshly. “What *I* did to *him*? Why does it have to be me doing something to him, for Christs sake?”

“Fine, then!” she almost shouts. “What did you *both* do?”

“You were there when I told Ty,” I say angrily. “What more do you want me to say?”

“I want you to tell the truth!” she moans, starting to cry.

I ignore the tears. “That *is* the truth! I didnt want him to stay here out of some fucking loyalty to me! He would have gotten bitter and left regardless!

If he was going to leave—and I *know* he would have eventually—it was better for Ty that it happened then. And you want a further truth?” I snap at her. “You want to know *more*, Anna? I couldnt have lived with myself knowing that he martyred himself like that. I could never have him hate me! It was easier for me to hate him! So yes! Yes, I chased him away! Are you happy now? Are you fucking satisfied!”

“Why couldnt you just tell me this?” she cries.

“Cant you hear how pathetic I sound?” I storm at her. “Why the hell would I have ever admitted to what I had done to *you* when I couldnt even admit it to myself? It was better to blame him for leaving, rather than have him blame me for staying. I was damned either way!”

She wraps her arms around herself and shakes. “Bear, Otter would have stayed not because you wanted him to, but because *he* wanted too. Dont you see that? He would have done it because he loves you and Ty. And that would have been enough for him.”

“Thats why he had to leave,” I say as my voice breaks. “Otter should never have just *enough*. He should have....” But I cant finish. “He should have what, Bear?” she says sadly.

“Never mind,” I say. “Forget it.”

This makes her anger flare up again. “I *won’t* forget it, Bear, and damn you for saying so! When will you fucking learn that this was never just about

you! This affects all of us!”

I laugh bitterly. “You all say that, but you could never understand.”

“Only because youre too fucking proud,” she snarls. “You want to talk of martyrdom, go take a look in the mirror.”

“I know that, Anna!” I cry at her.

“Then why are you so quick to judge those people who would do it for you?” she hisses. “How can you push those people away so easily?”

“You think it was easy?” I glare at her. “You think I havent regretted it every waking moment?”

“How would I know?” she says nastily. “You lied to me from the beginning.”

“I didnt know what else to do, Anna! Everything was falling apart around me, and I was *making* it happen!”

“What were you so scared of? Why couldnt you let somebody just help you because they wanted to?”

“Havent you been listening to a goddamn thing Ive said?” I growl.

“So thats it?” she asks, furiously pawing at her eyes. “Thats the whole story?”

“Yes, for Gods sakes,” I mutter as I wring my hands.

“Youre lying.”

“Anna, please....” I reach out my hand, but she ignores it.

“Is he in love with you, Bear?”

“No!”

“Youre *lying*.”

I bring my hands up and press my fists against my ears, trying to shut her out, trying to shut myself in, and its more than I can bear. I know what shes going to ask next, and I know what Im going to say, and I know I have an opportunity to be honest, to say something that my heart has been dreading. I know all of this, and it does little to fortify me against the way I shake, the way the tremors rip through my being. I bang my fists against my ears, hoping for some clarity, some light to magically appear and shine down and say, “*Yes, yes, it’s okay to say yes.*” But nothing happens, and its still dark, and I am left quaking.

“Are you in love with him?”

Oh God, oh my God. Bear....

“No!” I shout.

“*You’re... lying.*”

The plates shift, the earth moves.

How did we get here? I think, my mind all hot and panicky. *How the hell did*

we get to this point? How could I have ever let it get so far?

She glares at me, then hangs her head. "You know," she says, chuckling bitterly to herself, "for the longest time I thought it was Otter that had done something to you, but now... now I don't know. I never thought it would come to this. I always thought that we would...."

My heart pounds in my ears. "Nothing happened," I say hoarsely, hating how false I sound, even to myself. "Nothing happened."

"Oh, Bear," she says, raising her hand to her cover her mouth as she begins to sob quietly. "Oh, *Bear*," she says again, and I can hear it in her voice, and this finally breaks down all the walls I have hastily constructed since we stepped onto the balcony. I rush to her and wrap my arms around her and hug her close and bury my face in her hair.

"Please," I beg. "Please. God, please."

She slides away from me, saying, "No, Bear, no," and those words are like a dagger through my heart. I can feel her pulling away from me, feel her retreating, and fear smashes through me, glassy and sharp. I mutter please over and over and over again and try to grab her hands, her arms, her shoulders, anything to bring her back to me, but she tells me no, no, no, and I can see she's going to leave me, just like everyone else has ever done. It is happening *now*, and she is going to leave me *now*, and I will be alone forever because one day I know Ty is going to leave me, too, because everyone... always... *leaves*.

She chokes back further tears and pushes me away again, and I collapse against the wall and hug myself, trying to feel anything other than this pain. She steps back and wipes her eyes and brushes her hair out of her face.

"So, that's it?" I gasp out. "You're going to leave me too? Just like that? I've chased you away just like everyone else."

She appears startled for a moment, and I see recognition on her face, and I sense a sliver of hope as she walks over to me and puts her hand on my arm. But her words cut through this.

"Bear, I will never leave you or Ty. I will never be like *her*. But... it is... it's not going to be like it was anymore. You will always... have me as a part of your life. Just not like this. Never like this again."

"Why?" I moan.

"Bear, you... you have to figure it out for yourself." She leans against me, and I put my arms around her and cry into her hair.

"I don't know if I can do this without you," I sob.

She rubs the small of my back. “You wont have to. Its going to be different, but I will never abandon you.” She grips me tight and whispers fiercely into my ear, “*Ever*. Do you hear me, Derrick McKenna? *Ever*. I do love you. Youve broken my heart, but it was mine to give.”

Then shes gone.

I hear the door shut as she leaves the apartment, and her sobs renew as she runs down the stairs. I stagger inside and fall to my knees on the ground and lean forward and press my face into my hands and shake as an earthquake racks my body, my heart, my soul.

SOMETIME later—I dont know how long—theres a knock at my door. I rub my face and jump to my feet and rush to the door.

Its Otter.

“Hey,” I say, sniffing.

“Hey, yourself,” he says back, worry marring his face. “Anna called me.”

“She... Otter... I... I—”

I dont know what she has said to him or what Im trying to say, but I dont care because Otter suddenly fills the world, and hes all I can see, and

he enfolds me into him protectively, shielding me while I split and shatter and fall into myself. And even if hes not there to pick up the pieces later, I will always remember that he has at least given me this moment, this moment to break.

I WAKE, my face feeling stiff and cracked. Id been dreaming, but for once in a very long time I cant remember what it was about. I dont know what that means.

I squint my eyes open, and I see that Im on the couch in my living room, covered in a blanket. I start to wonder what Im doing here when the previous night comes washing back over me, and I groan. My mouth tastes horrible, and my head has a spike running through it. My clothes feel stiff against my body. I sit up and the motion is enough to make me gag. I still for a moment, waiting for the waves of dizziness to subside.

So just what are you going to do now? the voice whispers jauntily. *Look at you. You’re pathetic.*

“Leave me alone,” I spit through gritted teeth. “Just leave me the hell alone.” *Why? A conscience is never supposed to go away just because you want it to. That would just make things too easy. How could you ever learn anything that way? Oh, Bear, this is just going to be so much fun!*

“Please,” I whisper.

Grow the fuck up, it says coldly. You've gotten this far with people shitting everywhere you walk. It's time to grow up and stop feeling so sorry for yourself. Oh, I'm Bear. Listen to me. I'm so full of angst! Whatever shall I do? Life is so HARD! It laughs. Blah, blah, blah. At least he has the balls to say what he feels. At least Otter—

Otter.

I look wildly around the living room, but I'm alone. I jump up and throw open the curtains that I don't remember shutting and see that it is way too bright outside for it to be early morning. *Shit.* I run to my bedroom, yelling for Ty to wake the hell up because we are *late*. I throw open the bedroom door, already planning in my head how we need to get him up now and brush his teeth (no time for a shower) and there should be something clean for him to wear in the closet....

But there's no one there.

I go to the kitchen and no one is there, either, and I start to become unnerved when I see a note on the kitchen table with a familiar scrawl:

Bear,

You needed to sleep more. I got Ty up and ready for school and will drop him off. Don't worry about work. I called in and pretended to be you, and now apparently you're down with the flu. It seems I can do a good Sick Bear impression. Remind me to show you later.

Anyways, I'm going to go home afterward and try to get some sleep. Make sure you call me as soon as you wake up. I'm worried about you, Papa Bear.

Otter

P.S. Ty's been awake for ten minutes and already he's told me about the Amazing PETA People. Why the hell do you let him watch that kind of stuff?

My face splits, and I know it's because I'm smiling.

This realization wipes it away.

I stand in the shower for a good thirty minutes, alternating between hot

and cold because I'm either sweating or shivering, and I think maybe I *am* getting sick. When I can no longer take the water rushing on my body, I get out, wrapping a towel around my waist. I wipe the condensation of the mirror and stare at my reflection. I look pale and wan. My eyes are bruised and my lips cracked.

No wonder she broke up with me, I think, half-crazy. I look like a meth addict.

It tries to rise again, that feeling of despair, and I almost let it. It's so much

easier to feel sorry for yourself. I should know, I've done my fair share of it. I think I have it in check when just a shard slips through, and I see the lip of my reflection quiver slightly. I grip the edges of the sink and will myself to stop, to just fucking stop already. My reflection seems to listen as I glare at it. Its lip stops quivering, and its chest stops heaving, and blood starts to warm its cheeks. *There*, I think. *There, see? See? I can do this. I can do this.* I leave the bathroom, starting to feel better. It doesn't last long.

I try to rub my arms, but I still feel cold

I dress, but nothing I put on fits right.

I try and eat, but all the food tastes like sawdust.

I turn on the TV, but the lights and noise hurt my head.

I pace around the living room.

I pace in the kitchen.

I pace in the living room again.

I grab my car keys.

I get in my car.

I drive and drive and drive, and I think I'm going to leave. I think I'm going to leave and not look back.

It would be easier.

Ten minutes later, I become aware of my surroundings and see that I'm on a street I recognize, a street I know all too well. I try and stop myself, but I'm on autopilot. There is a pleasant buzzing in my head, and it's like there's cotton in my ears because everything is muted. I turn on the street where, when I was ten, I fell off my bike and scraped my knee. I pass the house where, when I was twelve, Creed and I had stolen a lawn gnome. I sail by a parking lot where, when I was fifteen, Mr. Thompson had taught me how to drive. I pull into a driveway that I've pulled into countless times before. I walk up a stone pathway that used to be covered in grass. I ring a doorbell that still surprises me as it sounds like my own. Nothing happens. I ring it again. And again. And again. I ring it until I hear a padding of feet, and then he opens the door, and it's like I'm eight again, and it's like he's sixteen again, and I want to ask him if Creed's home because I have come to stay the night, but I am afraid I'll shatter like glass. I stare at him and he stares at me, and finally I say, "I didn't know where else to go," and he steps back, and I walk past him into a house that I used to think of as a safe haven. I walk up the stairs, and I hear him following me. I beg him silently not to speak, and he doesn't. That's good because if he spoke, autopilot would disengage and reality would set in. I see

his door, and even though it no longer has a sign that says to *Keep Out*, that its *Otter's Room*, I know its Otters room.

I open the door and the bed is disheveled, and I know he was asleep. I sit down on the edge and take off my shoes, and I crawl up into the bed, pulling the covers up and over me, making a cave where a Bear can sleep. I am so tired, and I can barely keep my eyes open when I feel the bed dip carefully, and I know he is climbing back in. I lift up the covers so he can come into the cave. He crawls underneath and lies on his side, his eyes heavy with something that I can't quite make out, and he folds his arms around his front, laying his head upon his hands. I let the covers fall gently back down, and it gets dark in the Cave of Otter and Bear, but not so very dark that I can't still make out his eyes, his nose, his lips. My hand reaches out on its own accord and touches his cheek gently. It's stubbly, and he holds his breath, and I don't know why I'm doing this, but I am. He grabs my hand and holds it between his. He's about to say something, but I shake my head because I don't want to hear a single word. I turn and lie on my side, matching his position, and draw my knees up to my chest and they bump his, and that's where I leave them. I watch Otter watching me, and he still holds my hand, and I don't draw it away. That's how I stay until finally, inevitably, I fall asleep.

WHEN I wake, the sun is pouring in through the window above the bed. I stretch and look over at the other side of the bed, slight apprehension coursing through my body. It's empty. I breathe a quick sigh of relief and immediately feel guilty. I roll over and grab the pillow and hug it against myself.

What am I doing here? I think. *I just broke up with the only person I thought I could be with forever. And here I am, doing... what am I doing? This isn't right. This isn't who I am supposed to be.*

How do you know? it whispers back. *If you would allow yourself to think clearly for one single moment, you would know. You would know everything you have been trying not to be.*

I hug the pillow tighter and the door opens.

"Good," Otter says cheerfully. "You're awake. I thought I was going to have to drag you out of bed to wake you up."

I scamper up quickly against the headboard and hug the pillow to my chest. I look warily at Otter. He stands against the doorway, arms across his chest, leaning against the door jam. His short blond hair sticks out in different directions, and his green eyes sparkle, and his grin is as crooked as I've ever

seen it. I start to feel tightness in my chest and loins, and I squeeze the pillow tighter. His long legs are clad in loose black sweats, and his white tank top shows off a tan I could never have. His arms look strong pressed against his trim body. I forcibly look away, trying to focus my ministrations elsewhere. I hear him chuckle to himself quietly.

“What?” I say, the word coming out more harshly than I intend.

“Your hair looks hilarious.”

I scowl and frantically start brushing it down. “Yours doesnt look any better,” I retort.

“Ah, Bear after he just wakes up. I almost forgot how fun it is.”

“Shut up, Otter,” I say as I swing my legs over the edge of the bed and plant my feet on the floor. Before I can move any further, Otter is standing in front of me, hunkering down and sitting on the heels of his feet.

“Hey,” he says.

“Hey, yourself,” I mumble back.

He reaches out and touches my arm gently, and for a moment, I let his hand rest there. For a moment, I almost forget who I really am and can only focus on how good his touch feels. I pull my arm away and look over his head and hear him sigh.

“Bear,” he says.

“What, Otter?”

He stands up and takes a step back. “Its almost time to pick up the Kid from school. I told him you would be there when he got off.”

I stand up quickly, fishing my keys out of my pocket, relieved at the excuse I now have. I start automatically for the door and only stop when he says my name again. I dont want to turn around, not really, but I do, and hes standing in the same spot hed been in.

“I promised Ty Id try making him a tofu lasagna tonight,” he says. “I dont know how good itll be, but I said he could hang out here tonight. I hope you dont mind.”

I nod my head jerkily. “Thats fine. I can drop him off.”

He grins knowingly. “Nice try, Papa Bear. Youre not getting off the hook that easily. Youve got to help me make it.”

“Otter, I dont know.”

“I know you dont,” he says softly. “Bear, I dont know what happened between you and Anna, but I dont think that you should be by yourself right now. Youre eventually going to want to talk about it. I think its better for you

to be here.”

With you, I think as I start to fidget and play with my keys. “Ill think about it, Otter. Okay?”

“Bear,” he says in that voice of his, that warning voice that drives me fucking crazy.

“Please, Otter,” I whisper. “Just... just take it slow with me, okay? I dont know what the hell Im doing right now, and I just need you... to just... I dont know.”

He walks over and stands in front of me and, even though I hate myself for doing it, I flinch and take a step back. Im almost out the door when he grabs both my shoulders, and I cant help but look up at him and what I see, the regard in his eyes, almost knocks me on my back. No one ever looks at anyone like this. Its never supposed to be like this. It cant be real.

“Bear,” he says evenly. “You have to believe that I dont know whats going on here, either. Im just trying to be your friend.” He smiles sadly at me. “Can you trust me to do that?”

Its strange. Its strange because I can. I nod, my eyes wide.

“Okay, then,” he says and turns around and goes to his desk and starts fiddling with a camera that is splayed out in pieces across the table.

Im about to leave, but that buzzing picks up again, starting in my toes and working its way up through until I can feel it in my ears. Suddenly Im behind him, and I circle my arms around his waist and lay my head on his back. He starts, but only for a moment. He slowly, carefully, leans back into me and brings his hands up and pats mine gently. I take a deep breath, and he smells like Otter, a smell that hasnt changed since the first time I met him.

I pull away and walk out of the room, my mind ablaze.

6. Where Bear Hears a Story and Makes a Decision

“ H_{IVA}, Bear!” Ty shouts as I pull up in front of the school. He says goodbye to some of his friends and tramples his way through the crowd. I grin as he almost knocks a girl down that he seems to go out of his way to walk near. I think of how Creed had kicked Suzy March in the stomach. I wonder if this little girl was at his party.

“Hey, Kid. Whats the word?” I ask.

He grins at me. “Im glad its the weekend. Ive had the longest week *ever*.” I burst out laughing because he sounds like a forty-five-year-old businessman.

“Youre telling me,” I agree. “Im glad its the weekend too.” He waves at some of his friends still standing at the front of the school. The little girl turns and waves brightly at him, and he scowls and turns to face the front.

“So whos that?” I ask casually.

“Whos who?” he says, dancing around the question.

I look pointedly at him. “That lovely young dame that you seem so very fond of.”

The Kid frowns at me. “You mean Amy?” He makes a rude noise and suddenly sounds like a nine-year-old again. “Shes nobody.”

“Is she in your class?” I ask, trying to keep my mirth from rising.

“No. Shes in a grade above me.”

“Oh. So shes older.”

“I guess. Why are you asking about her?”

I shrug. “She seems nice. Was she at your birthday party?”

“No. I didnt invite her.”

“Why not?”

“Well, because!” he sputters. “Shes... *mean* and... I just dont like her!”

“Shes mean to you? Do you need me to talk to her teacher?” I say, keeping a straight face.

The Kid pales. “No,” he says hastily. “I think I can handle it.”

“I bet you can.”

He glares up at me. “Are you making fun of me?”

I grin. "I wouldn't dream of it."

"Good. Because I've had quite the day, and I don't want to have to put up with your nagging."

"My *nagging*?" I burst out laughing. Much to my relief, this cracks through him, and he starts laughing too. I reach over and ruffle his hair, and he complains good-naturedly but grabs onto my hand and pulls it into his lap. He plays with my fingers, humming quietly to himself. I wait.

"She eats meat," he says finally.

"And that's bad? I eat meat."

"That's okay, though. You're my big brother. She's just a dumb girl."

"Those are always the best ones, huh?"

He eyes me with great consideration. "I don't know, Bear. Are you and Anna okay?"

I grip the steering wheel tightly. "So, you heard that one too."

He grimaces. "It was kind of hard not to, Papa Bear."

"What did you hear?" I asked, suddenly nervous.

He shakes his head. "Just yelling. I'm sorry, Bear. I didn't mean to hear it."

I pat his hand. "It's okay, Kid. I'm sorry too. It should have never gone down like that. I should have thought that through a little bit."

"Otter took me to school today!" he says, excited. I grin sickly at the change in topic. "He's never done that before. He took me to get donuts!"

"Good Ol Otter."

"Yep, good Ol Otter. Hey, why are we going back to our house? Otter said we were going to his house tonight! He promised, Bear! He's making lasagna!"

I roll my eyes. "Take a breath, Ty. I know he promised. We're just stopping by the house real quick so you can change."

"Can we stay the night too?"

Uh, what?

"Er... not tonight," I stammer. "Maybe some other time."

"Why not?"

"Because I said, that's why."

He crosses his arms and groans. "We never get to do anything fun."

"Kid," I say sternly. "There's a lot going on that you just... just...." I try to finish, but he is making little begging noises and scrunching up his face, and I dare anyone to try and say no to *that*. My heart skips a little beat as I say, "Fine. But you owe me. Big-time."

“You rock, Papa Bear.”

An hour later finds us back at Otters house. As soon as Im in the driveway, Tys out the door and running inside. “Ill be right in,” I call after him and turn off the car. I bump my hands lightly against the steering wheel and tap my leg nervously. Going inside now is going to be a big step, and Im not sure what it means. Before I can stop myself, Im dialing my phone, and it starts to ring. I want to hang up, but I cant because I need to hear her voice. It has come over me suddenly, and I think theres time to hang up before she answers. But still I wait, tapping my hand and bouncing my knee.

“Hey, Bear,” Anna says. She sounds tired.

“Hey, yourself,” I say back.

“Whats up?”

“Nothing. Whats up with you?”

“You know. Whyd you call?”

I shrug and grit my teeth, stupidly realizing she cant see me. “I dont know. I just wanted to talk to you.”

“About?”

“Does it have to be about anything?”

She sighs. “Bear, its always going to be about something.”

“It doesnt have to be,” I say, fighting back tears. “We can just... cant we just go back?”

She laughs, not unkindly. “I dont think so, Bear. I cant ever see how. It wouldnt be fair to either of us.”

“But we could. If we really wanted to. We could, I know we could, Anna.” I am fighting for this for reasons I dont completely understand. I think part of me wants this to maintain some sense of normalcy. To maintain one of the few constants Ive had in my life. Its safe, its comfortable, and its the only place Ive known.

“Bear,” she says, and I can hear how thick her voice gets. “Bear, who are you trying to convince?”

Both of us. “I dont know,” I say instead.

“Bear, I am going to ask you to do me a favor, okay?” she says, weeping openly now. “Im going to ask you for one thing. But you have to promise me this because its the only way we are going to make it. Understand? Its the only way Ill ever be able to stay in your life. Can you do this for me, Bear?”

“Yes. Anything, Anna. Anything for you.”

“Dont ever call me like this again. Whenever we speak from here, its as

friends. It cant ever happen again. Okay?”

“Okay,” I sniff into the phone. “I do love you, though.”

“I know you do and Im glad.” And I believe her.

“Anna?”

“Yeah?”

“Can I ask you a question? Not about us?”

“Yes,” she says immediately.

“Did you... why did you call Otter last night?”

She takes a deep breath and exhales slowly. “Did he come over?” “Uh-huh.”

“Good. You needed a friend. I knew that he would understand what youre going through. He told me....” And then she stops, as if catching herself.

“Told you what?” I ask, curious.

She curses softly. “He told me about what happened to him in San Diego. I called him, probably sounding hysterical. Once I was able to calm down enough, he told me the story.”

“He did?” I say, trying to keep the surprise out of my voice. And dont I feel a pang of something else? Doesnt it feel strangely like jealousy? But who in Gods name am I jealous of?

She hears it in my voice. “Dont be like that, Bear,” she chides me. I startle when theres a *tap-tap-tap* at my window. I look up and see Otter staring curiously into the car. I realize that I have been out here for quite a while. Telling Anna to hold on for a minute, I roll down the window.

“Everything cool?” he asks calmly as he leans in. His finger drapes dangerously close to my arm.

“Yeah,” I say quickly. “Just on the phone. Ill be right in.”

He gives me a knowing look and walks back inside.

“Sorry,” I say, putting the phone back on my ear.

“Was that Otter?” she asks, her voice betraying nothing.

I cant lie to her now. “Yes. Hes making the Kid a tofu lasagna, and Ty would murder me if I hadnt brought him.”

“That sounds less than appetizing.”

“Youre telling me. At least you dont have to eat it.” And she laughs and something somewhere rights itself. Maybe not back into the position that it was in before, but close. So very close.

“So, you were saying?” I ask.

“What? Oh, right. Otter. Well, I dont know how much more I should say. If youre going to hear it, it should be from him. And dont try to force it, either,

Bear. I know you too well and thats the only reason I say that. And just so you know, I didnt really tell him what the fight was about.”

“I know.”

“After he got done telling me his reasons for coming back, I realized he could understand. More than most people could. And I knew that you needed someone to talk to. But I also know you probably didnt say anything to him. Thats just what you do.”

“I kind of cried and fell asleep,” I admit.

She laughs but then sobers. “Dont keep it inside forever, Bear. Youll end up hating yourself if you do.”

“Thank you,” I say, wishing she was right next to me so she could see just how sincere I am.

“Youre welcome. Tell Ty I love him for me. Im going to let you go now, okay?” I know she means hang up the phone, but there is something more to those last words she speaks, and I can hear her waiting for me to answer. I rack my brain, wondering if there is anything left unsaid, anything that I think she should know. Nothing comes to mind, and it breaks my heart just a little bit more.

“Okay,” I say sadly.

“Good-bye, Bear.”

“Bye, Anna.”

Then shes gone too.

I WALK into the house feeling heavy. Dont get me wrong; I know Ive done nothing but bring this on myself. Normally Im not one to wallow in selfpity, but its something I havent been able to do for the last three years. It feels alien, foreign. Dark thoughts pitter-patter around my head, and I do little to push them away. Maybe Im supposed to be like this. Maybe its what I deserve.

Blah, blah, blah.

Ty is sitting on the counter while Otter is telling him a story. The Kid doesnt see me enter, but Otter does, and he glances at me quickly and winks. I smile vaguely and wait for him to finish.

“And so then,” Otter says, “that guy just came down and stands next to me in line at the bank. Now remember, I hadnt been in California long at that point and didnt know how people acted there. So, being the nice guy that I am, I say hi. But remember, I think he cant hear me because he had headphones on and was rocking out to whatever he was listening to, right?”

“Right,” Ty says, rapt.

“So the lines not moving, but I can feel the guy bopping his head behind me because he keeps getting closer and closer until hes bumping into me. I try to ignore him, but he starts bumping into me harder and harder. So finally, I turn around to glare at him, and he stops rocking out and glares at me right back! And you know what I saw?”

“What!” Ty says excitedly.

“The headphones he was wearing,” Otter says, pausing dramatically, “werent attached to *anything*. No iPod, no Walkman, no nothing. He was just wearing the headphones! He notices me noticing this, and I try to keep a straight face, but he leans over to me and do you know what he said?”

Ty has his hands to his mouth, and I can hear him whisper, “Whatd he say, Otter?”

Otters face suddenly morphs. He sticks his bottom jaw out and arches both eyebrows together and puffs out his cheeks. The change is startling, and I almost burst out laughing, ruining the story. Otters voice drops, and it comes out deep and gravely: “„I dont need no fancy music box, boy. I gots all the music I needs in my head. Thats where I got alllll the hits.” I cant keep it in anymore: my laughter brays out of me and echoes across the kitchen. Ty jerks and cranes his head and sees its me and rolls his eyes and turns his attention back to Otter. This cuts off my laughter immediately, as Ive just been rebuked again by the Kid.

“People are weird in California, Otter,” he says seriously. “Im glad you came back before you got weird too.”

Otter nods his head solemnly. “Im glad too. Crazy Otters would never know how to make a vegetarian lasagna.” He ruffles the Kids hair, and Ty turns around to look at me.

“Otter said you were talking on the phone and thats why you took forever.” Otter shrugs apologetically behind the Kids back. Ty stares at me quizzically. “Who were you talking to, Bear?”

I move toward the Kid and hoist myself up onto the countertop where hes sitting. I put one arm around his shoulders and bring him into me, kissing the top of his head. “I was talking to Anna,” I say quietly.

He nods and looks at Otter. “Anna and Bear broke up again,” he says sadly. “It wasnt like the other times, though. I think it was for real this time.”

Otter stands in front of the Kid and bends over, putting his hands on his knees. “No, I dont think it was like the other times, either. But you know

what Anna told me?” Ty looks up at him. “She told me that she loves you, and she isnt going to go anywhere. Isnt that right, Papa Bear?”

I glance at him gratefully before turning back to the Kid. “Thats right, Kid. Just because she and I arent dating anymore doesnt mean you wont see her again. She told me last night that shes going to make sure she sees you as much as she can.”

“Im not just sad about that,” the Kid says.

“Well, what else are you sad about?” Otter asks.

The Kid thinks for a moment, then says, “Im sad for Bear. I dont want him to be alone forever.” Once again, for what seems like the billionth time in the last few days, hot tears sting my eyes. Otter comes to my rescue.

“How can he be alone?” he exclaims. “Hes got you and me! I think thats going to be just enough, dont you?”

“I guess,” the Kid tells Otter. “But what happens when you go away again, Otter? Creeds going back to school, and youll go back to California, and Anna... Anna will just be gone. Papa Bear will just have me, and I dont know if I could do it on my own.”

I dont respond, but this time on purpose. Yes, Im choked up once again like a little fucking girl. I cant honestly believe a person has as much liquid in their body as has forced its way out of me over the last two days. But the real reason I dont say anything is because I, like the Kid, am waiting to hear what Otter is going to say. However selfish that is, I need to hear what hes going to say.

Otter stands up straight, and I can feel him looking down at the two of us huddled in front of him, two lost children. I brace myself for whatever answer hes going to give, hoping hell at least lie for Tys sake (and maybe for my own). He should never have this burden, but Im tired of carrying it on my own.

“Ty,” Otter says finally, “Im not going to go anywhere for a very long time. And if I do, well, then, maybe... maybe you and Bear can go with me.”

Ty launches himself off the counter, and Otter catches him deftly and pulls him up into his arms. I can see Ty whisper something in his ear, and Otters eyes go wide, and he glances down at me and then focuses back on the Kid. Ty punctuates his whispers with a poke in Otters chest and Otter nods. The Kid sits back in his arms and says, “You promise to do what I say? You have to promise.”

“I promise,” Otter says.

Ty stares at him until he is sure Otter is telling the truth, then wiggles out of his arms. "Bear, can I go watch Anderson Cooper now?" he says, pulling on my leg.

"Sure, Kid," I tell him, my voice coming out perfectly natural. Coming out as if wed all just been talking about the weather. Ty runs out of the living room, yelling at us to tell him when the foods ready. Otter looks at me thoughtfully and goes to the fridge and pulls out a couple of beers, handing one to me. I crack it open and drain half of it in one swig. It burns down my throat and settles warmly into my stomach.

Otter looks like hes about to say something, but thinks better of it and starts pulling out the ingredients to make Tys dinner. I watch him as he works for a few minutes, the silence noticeable but not uncomfortable. The sound of the TV enters into the kitchen, so I know that anything I say now will go unheard by the Kid in the living room. I jump down off the counter and play with the top of the beer bottle.

He wants us to go with him? I think. And do what? Goddammit, Otter, I told you to take things slow, for fuck's sake! That's not even going to be possible. How the hell could you even think of saying that without even mentioning it to me first! Not that you should have said anything at all....

"Bear, youre thinking too much again," Otter says, reading through a recipe in the open book in front of him. "I can feel it from here." This startles me from my thoughts, and I open my mouth and start sputtering nonsense, and he looks at me and shakes his head, asking for me to get the noodles out of the pantry. I do, still bubbling nonsensicals that are supposed to be forming coherent denials, but I think all Im doing is making a lot of noise with my mouth. I hand him the noodles, and the box is shaking, and he wraps his hand around it and my hand. "Bear, stop it."

I do.

He takes some more stuff from the fridge and starts setting it on the counter. I finish my liquid courage and grab another one over his shoulder. I know I shouldnt be drinking, but I dont give a shit.

"So hows Anna?" Otter asks casually, and I spill a little beer on myself.

He tosses me a rag, and I mop it up.

"Shes okay, I guess," I mumble.

"Thats good. She sounded better when I got done talking to her last night."

I nod. "She said you helped her a lot. She said you...." I hesitate but

decide to go for broke. “She said you told her about why you came back here.”

He stiffens only for a second, but I still catch it. “Did she say anything about it to you?”

“No,” I say truthfully. “She said when youre ready, youll tell me.”

“Shes a good kid,” he says. “Im sorry you guys had a fight.”

I snort. “Oh come on, Otter. You dont need to coddle me like that. It wasnt just a fight, and you know it. We broke up; its done. And this time its for good.”

He laughs quietly. “Youre right, I should know better than that. I just... I dont know. I hope you guys are going to be okay.”

“Maybe,” I say. “Honestly? I think that shes better off now, anyways. She deserves a lot more than I could ever give her. I wasnt exactly the greatest boyfriend in the world.”

He winces. “I wish you wouldnt do that.”

“Do what?” I ask, taking another sip of beer.

“Be so self-deprecating. Thats a habit youve gotten into that needs to be broken right now.”

“Yes, sir,” I scoff at him.

He turns and crosses his arms across his chest and looks at me sternly. “I mean it, Bear. There are enough people out there that will be more than willing to knock you down. Theres no reason for you to do it to yourself.”

I wave my hands in surrender. “You win. Im sorry. From now on, Ill be so high on myself youll regret ever saying anything.” I jump up onto a chair and beat my chest proudly. “I am fucking *awesome*,” I say in my deepest voice possible. “I am the epitome of hard-fucking-core.”

Otter rolls his eyes at me and waves his hand over the food. “You done yet? I was thinking you could help me make this seeing as Ive never made anything vegetarian in my life.”

I jump down from the chair and push him out of the way and look down to read the recipe. I am acutely aware that he is watching me now, and I wonder what hes thinking about. I wonder what makes him want us to come with him. I blush as I realize how stupid I sound.

Otter comes to stand next to me and leans over the recipe book. “So, Ty came in screaming loudly that we were having a sleepover.”

I blush harder. “Uh... yeah. He kind of insisted on it.” I start to babble: “I should have asked. I mean, its your house, right? You probably have plans

and dont need us hanging out over here all the time. Maybe we should just do this some other time. Ill go get Ty, and we can go—”

“Bear, shut up,” he says, cutting me off before I can become even more retarded. “You know that youre more than welcome to stay here. I like having... people over. This house is too big to have just one person in it.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“Besides,” he says wickedly, “I told Ty this morning that you guys were going to stay here. Weve kind of already planned this.”

I try to kick him in the shins, but hes too quick for me and dances away, laughing, always laughing.

MUCH to my surprise, the lasagna turned out pretty good. Ty relished watching every bite I took. I made him scowl at me when I told him I had put a small piece of meat in it, and he refused to eat anymore until Otter had convinced him that I was a “liar and a fat mouth.” This sent Ty off into gales of laughter, and he fell off his chair, and that got me laughing, and Otter grumbled, saying how he could never have a nice dinner anymore. Ty and I both stuck our tongues out at him, and then he threw a piece of French bread at me, and it bounced off my head and knocked over my beer. Ty tried to keep it in but was lost again to his amusement, and I took my turn and glared at Otter, but he just shrugged innocently and said it served me right for lying to a nine-year-old. I couldnt think of anything witty to say back, so I sat there, mouth gaping like a goldfish.

Otter had even gotten the Kid more soy ice cream, so we sat in the living room, watching CNN and taking turns licking the spoon. Its absolutely the worst stuff Ive ever tasted in my entire life, but I didnt want to get another threatening look from Ty, so every time he offered me a bite, I took it. Otter did, too, and once, when Ty looked back down at the bowl, Otter made a gagging face at me, and I made one back. We both started laughing, and Ty looked at me threateningly anyway.

Eventually, Tys eyes started to droop and his head started to nod, but he kept insisting he wasnt tired. Then he fell asleep in mid-sentence, and I picked him up and took him to Creeds room. He yawned as I made him put on his pajamas and brush his teeth. He grinned sleepily at the thought of sleeping in Uncle Creeds room. Otter came in and said good night and promised him waffles for breakfast, with crunchy peanut butter and maple syrup. He kissed the Kid on the forehead and walked out the door.

I turn back to the Kid, and he smiles happily at me. “Are you going to be

okay in here?" I ask.

He nods. "You're not going to go home are you? You having a sleepover too?"

"Yeah, Kid. I'm staying here too."

"Well, where are you going to sleep?"

To be honest, I haven't really thought about this. Maybe because my mind has been shutting that part out all evening. But the night is almost at an end, and I'm going to have to think of something soon. I didn't even bring any clothes to sleep in.

"I don't know, Kid. Maybe I'll sleep in Creeds parents room."

"Just sleep in Otters bed," he tells me. "That's right down the hall, and I can find you if I need to."

Goddammit.

I nod slowly. "Okay. I'll have to make sure it's okay with Otter."

"He won't care. Goodnight, Papa Bear."

"Night, Kid," I say as I stand and set the lamp on its lowest setting. I close the door partway and start walking down the hallway, my mind in eight billion different places at once.

Can it really be this easy? I think. Could it really be so... quick... to be like that? I was with Anna, for Christ's sake! We had sex and I enjoyed it! I would still be with her if I hadn't... hadn't...

Well, had I not kissed Otter. True, those words were never spoken out loud to her but doesn't she have her suspicions? Didn't she—

is he in love with you

—ask me a question no girlfriend should have asked in the first place? And why couldn't I—

are you in love with him

—look her in the eye when I rebuked her? Why did she say I was lying?

What is it that people can see that I can't? How could she ever know when I can't even face it myself? Why would she be so quick to point me in his direction?

I remember being almost eleven years old, watching Otter graduate high school. I remember later that summer, sitting in his room, feeling morose as I watched him packing his room to leave for college. I remember him smiling the Otter smile and sitting next to me on the bed, saying, "You look like someone died, Bear." I remember not being able to tell him that it *felt* like someone had died because he was leaving. I remember watching him drive

away. I remember him coming home the first time, his eyes wild with things I would never know. I remember the way I had jumped onto his back the first time I'd seen him.

I remember being fourteen and having just had sex with Anna for the first time and calling Otter right away, wanting to brag, but really wanting to feel consoled as I was scared half to death. I remember being fifteen and watching Otter graduate college. I remember him saying, "Now, they say life really begins." I remember him laughing when I asked who "they" were.

I remember him moving back home. I remember being eighteen and my mom leaving. I remember graduating high school with Otter watching me. I remember him telling me that there was no one else who could take care of Ty like I could. I remember wanting to hit him but something entirely different happening instead.

I also remember him leaving. I remember that most of all, because I can't ever remember a time when he wasn't a force in my life. I remember the anger and darkness I had felt. I remember I'd been the one to chase him away. I remember him saying that he left because of his *influence*, but I remember that it always takes two. I remember so much; I remember too much.

I stand outside his door. I know that if I go in, everything will change. I'm almost able to reach out for the door handle, and then I do. My fingers feel the cool metal of the knob, but then I stop. *It can't be like this. It can't be this easy. I love Anna. I love Anna.* I try to remember something, anything about Anna, but my mind draws a blank. It's like he's erased her from me. I squeeze my eyes shut and am about to turn and go back to Creed's room when the door opens in front of me, light and Otter spilling out to me.

"Hey," he says, startled to see me right in front of his door. "What are you doing?"

"I was just... thinking some thoughts," I say lamely.

Otter shakes his head. "You always do, Papa Bear. I don't suppose that'll ever change. It's one of the reasons I..." He stops, as if catching himself.

"It's one of the reasons you what?" I ask curiously.

"Never mind, Bear. It doesn't matter. Hey, I got you some clothes to sleep in. There, on my bed." He pushes past me and walks into his bathroom and shuts the door.

I quickly change, not wanting to be caught in any stage of undress before he comes back. He has given me the pair of black sweat pants I'd seen him wearing earlier. I swim in them and feel self-conscious about my chicken

legs. I slip the black tank top over my head, and its two or three sizes too big. My skin is pale against the fabric. I rub my arms quickly as goose flesh appears. I feel like an imposter, a child dressing up in big-people clothing. I think this is all an act. I dont know how much longer I can avoid this.

He comes back into the room and glances at me. His expression is unreadable. I want to crack open his head and crawl inside to find out what he thinks about when he looks at me. I need to know if he feels sorry for me, because I couldnt stand that. Ive never wanted his pity, and I certainly wont take it now.

He sits on the bed and stretches. The white tank top he wears rises up, just an inch, but it still reveals miles of hard brown skin underneath. His pajama shorts sit low on his waist, and I can see where the tan ends and the white begins, and then he stops, and I wonder what hes doing. I wonder if hes trying to... do something to me. I wonder if thats been his plan all along. Ever since I was a little kid. I wonder if its his fault Im so fucking torn like I am right now. I wonder if he knows about this and is getting off on it. Nauseous guilt rolls through me, and it takes everything in my power not to grimace as my stomach clenches.

This is Otter. He would never....

“You okay?” he asks me.

I nod once.

“Well, thats good, I guess. Ive made up the guest room next door for you.”

“Oh,” I say, feeling relieved, but unable to stop it from sounding disappointed.

He arches an eyebrow at me.

“But...,” I mumble. “I just... thought....” I wave my arms around the room, trying to show something in the general vicinity.

“You thought what, Bear?” he asks, sounding genuinely confused. “You know...,” I stammer uncomfortably. “I could... sleep....” He bursts out laughing. “Im just fucking with you,” he says, grinning evilly. I want to kick his ass, but I also want to throw up because I was ready to go to the other room.

“Thats not funny, Otter,” I say as I glare at him.

He shrugs. “Maybe not now. Youll laugh at it someday. Someday youll laugh at all of this.” He turns and crawls farther up the bed and slides up with his back against the headboard and looks at me expectantly. I shudder; has

his bed always been this small? It wasn't like this earlier. I almost bolt from the room, but I walk toward him, drawn by some force I can't yet name. I feel awkward in my big people clothes. I'm too white, I'm too skinny, I'm too everything for him to want... well, to want whatever it is he wants. His eyes never leave me as I lean down and sit on the bed, my back to him. I shudder again, and my teeth start chattering. I can't help it, and my whole body shakes and my hands flex uncontrollably, and I tense my jaw, willing it to stop. A hand falls on my back, and for just a moment, a split second, the tremor worsens. But then it's gone.

"Bear?" I hear Otter ask gently.

I turn and throw myself at him, burying my face in his chest. He doesn't startle this time, and his hands are in my hair, and before I can stop, I'm telling him what happened with Anna. How I had lied about him being at my house that night, how she had looked at me with angry tears in her eyes. I tell him how I'd felt like I'd chased him away so he would never hate me. When I get to this part, I think I'll hesitate, but I don't. Otter never interrupts me, and I'm grateful. I tell him how I still could not admit to Anna that I'd kissed him. I tell him she called me a liar. I tell him everything; well, I tell him *almost* everything. When I get to the part of her asking if he was in love with me or I was in love with him, I stop. The words won't come out of my mouth, and I think that's okay for now. Maybe one day I'll be able to tell him how it all really ended.

After I'm done talking, my throat is dry, and I feel hollow and soft, like a rotting pumpkin months after Halloween. Throughout my confession, Otter's hands remained in my hair, tugging gently. At one point his thumbs rub against my eyebrows, and I embarrass myself by making a happy humming sound at the back of my throat. I lay curled against his chest, once again wanting to know what he's thinking.

Finally, he says, "So you just weren't satisfied with making sure the Kid had a proper future, but you thought you'd make sure I'd have one too?" I shrug meekly. "It sounds kind of stupid when you say it like that." "Bear," he says gruffly from somewhere above me, "it sounds stupid no matter how you say it."

I sit up, annoyed. "You didn't have to leave," I point out.

He stares hard at me, his big arms across his chest. "So you've said a few times now," he says carefully. "But I already told you why I did."

"It doesn't look like your reasons mattered, though," I say thoughtfully.

“Why do you say that?”

“Well, youre here now. And so am I.”

He shakes his head. “Bear, we dont even know what that means yet.” “I know that, Otter,” I say. “But can you... can you wait until I... figure

that out?” I dont know what Im even asking for, but I choose not to clarify for fear of making it worse. He reaches up and pulls me back to him. I lay stiffly against him, wanting an answer. I want an answer now before I end up making a fool of myself.

“Like I told Ty earlier,” he says in my ear, “Im not going anywhere.”

I try to sit back up, but he holds me against his chest. When I speak, my lips are moving against the fabric of his shirt. From this vantage point, I can see his right nipple harden. A dark buzz races through my body. “You also told Ty that you would go back. Eventually.” I cant finish what he had actually said.

“Ye-es,” he draws out. “I also seem to remember saying something else in that, too, that you seem to be avoiding.”

“Of course Im avoiding it, Otter,” I say angrily. “Why would you even say something like that? Why would you get the Kids hopes up like that?” *And why would you get my hopes up like that?*

“His hopes up?” Otter repeats. “You think I wasnt serious?” I tense against him. “How could you be?”

He pulls on my chin, forcing my eyes to his. “Why *wouldn’t* I be?” he says.

I pull away. “Otter, I cant just pack up and move. Ive got a job here, and the Kid has school, and we would just get in the way. Besides, I cant afford to live in California.”

“Ive got money,” he starts, but I hold up my hand and cut him off.

“I dont want you to have to take care of us, Otter. Ive done fine on my own these last couple of years.” I am feeling slightly mortified at what Otter is suggesting, that he would be paying for our lives. I would never feel comfortable allowing him to do that. I still have my damnable pride, and whether thats good or bad, I dont know. But I do know that doesnt matter.

“What about school? You *are* going to go back to school eventually, right? Youre not going to be able to have a full-time job and go to school and take care of Ty.”

I wring my hands. “Ill figure something out.”
He snorts. “What, when Ty graduates?”

“How did this suddenly become any of your concern?” I snap at him. “Why are you even going back to San Diego, anyways? I thought something bad happened. Thats why youre here, isnt it?”

He glares back, his eyes glittering. “Thats part of it,” he says flatly. “And maybe its also because I thought I should try to make up for past mistakes.”

Im livid and I dont know why. I get up and start pacing his room. “Oh, so something bad happens to you, and you just happen to decide then that you need to „make up for past mistakes?” This last part comes out slightly mocking, and Id regret it if I wasnt so pissed off. “You gotta admit, Otter, thats perfect goddamn timing.”

Otter jumps up and stands in front of me, his presence large and fierce. I dont care; I scowl right back, my arms tense at my side. “Why do you do that?” he growls. “Why do you seem bent on driving people away?”

“I think the question we should be asking,” I say hotly, “is that if whatever you went through in California hadnt happened, would you even be here?”

I watch all the fight drain out of him. He slumps onto the bed and lies on his back, one arm over his head, the other tapping gently against his stomach. I cant help but notice, even now, how his shirt rides up again, and I can see his smooth hard stomach. The ridges of skin there cause my mouth to go dry. I alternate between hot and cold, heaven and hell. I want to keep fighting, I want to keep hashing this out, but Otter looks so dejected that I cant. I sigh and sit on the bed next to him. I pat his leg awkwardly. “Youre right,” I say sadly. “I seem to chase everyone away.”

He sits up and puts his hands in his lap. “I shouldnt have said that,” he says quietly. “I have no right to say anything to you.”

I carefully lean my head on his shoulder, and he relaxes and drops his head onto mine. “What did Ty say to you when he whispered in your ear?” I ask.

Otter chuckles. “He said that Ive got to take care of you now. He said youre just a little guy and that you need to be taken care of.”

“And you promised him that?”

He raises his head and looks at me, surprised. “Of course. Why wouldnt I promise that?”

I shake my head in disbelief. “I dont get you sometimes.”

“Thats because Im mysterious,” he says, grinning crookedly. I punch his arm gently. He catches my hand and entwines his fingers with mine. His

hands are smooth and hard. Something crackles in my brain, like a wire shorting out. Ive never held hands with a guy like this before. Not with our fingers matching perfectly. Its weird.

“Youre not *that* mysterious,” I tell him seriously.

“Please,” he scoffs. “Im an enigma that youre still trying to figure out.”

I roll my eyes. “Theres not much there to figure out.”

He grins again. “That mouth of yours is going to get you in trouble one day.” He slides back up to the bed and pulls me with him. We resume the position we were in: me on his chest, his hands playing gently with my hair. I am nodding off when he speaks.

“I didnt tell Anna everything,” he says softly. “Theres some parts I left out because I didnt want to scare her about anything. She was really broken up after you guys fought, so I tried to keep anything that involved you out of what I told her about what happened in San Diego.”

“What do you mean „involved me?” I ask. “I was never in San Diego.”

I can feel him shake his head. “Ill get to it. But youve got to let me tell this my way, okay? Just wait until the end, and then you can say whatever you want to. I promise.” I nod and feel him take a deep breath and start to speak.

This story has been kind of built up. I don't know if you're going to be disappointed or what when it's over because when I say it out loud, it sounds like I'm losing my mind. But I will promise you one thing: I will leave nothing out, and everything I tell you is the truth.

I^{ts} three years ago, and were standing in my apartment, and Otter feels

my lips press against him, and for a moment, he allows himself to feel shocked and pleased and moved. Then reality sets in as I pull away and a voice rings out in his head, screaming, “*What are you doing to him? He's just a kid, and he's drunk! What the hell are you doing!*” He sees me collapse on the couch mumbling words he cant understand, but hes too frozen to move. Hes still angry at me for yelling at him just a few moments ago when I was pushing him to leave. And hes horrified with himself for allowing himself to be kissed like this. He knows hes wanted it to happen, but he also knows that Im straight, and he thinks its his fault that I am the way I am. He hears me stop talking and start snoring, and hes able to finally move. His

mind is telling him to stay away from me, but his heart cant bear leaving without at least saying good-bye. Because, you see, hes already made up his mind; hes going to go home and get a couple hours of sleep and start packing, and by this time tomorrow hell be in California on his way to someplace new. But before he goes, he has to see me one last time. He puts his arms underneath me and lifts me like Im a child. Hes surprised about how easy it is to pick me up, how perfectly I fit into his arms. His heart breaks a little then, and he knows that hes going to be damned in my eyes for leaving, but he sees no other choice.

I move a bit in his arms and bury myself into his chest. He carries me quietly to my room, where Ty is asleep. He lays me gently on my bed and raises the covers to my chin. He sits on the bed for a moment, brushing the hair from my face, touching my cheek. He thinks hes never seen anyone more handsome than me at that moment. He finds its getting harder and harder to leave, and he wants nothing more than to just lay down with me and deal with the consequences in the morning. But he cant because he has to protect me from him. He finally stands and walks over to Ty and thinks, *You take care of Papa Bear, okay? You take care of him, and he'll take care of you. You're in better hands than you could ever hope to be.* He kisses the Kid gently on the forehead and blinks back the sudden tears. He needs to hold it together, at least until he gets into the car.

He comes back to me and watches me sleep for just a moment longer before he kneels beside the bed and does something he hasnt done in a very long time: he prays.

Please, God. Please make sure You take care of these two. You see, God, I'm not going to be able to right now. I want to, but I can't. I have to leave them, and I know it's not going to be easy for any of us, but if You could just please keep a close eye on Bear and Ty, I'd appreciate it more than You'll ever know.

He feels slightly foolish at speaking to God like this, knowing that even if theres a God, he doesnt take personal requests. He doesnt know what else to do. He leans over me and whispers into my ear, "Im sorry. I hope youll be able to forgive me one day." He wants to say more, so much more, but he doesnt because he thinks it wont matter. His lips brush my forehead. He gets up and doesnt look back, knowing that if he does, any control he has will be gone.

On the ride back, he sobs uncontrollably. Eventually, he makes it home.

He wakes sometime later. Its still dark outside. He packs up what he can and shoves it quickly and quietly into his car. He only takes what he needs to survive for now, knowing if he needs more, he can either buy it or send for his old things. By the time hes finished, its light out, and people are waking in the house. Creed comes down the stairs, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes, and freezes as he sees Otter loading the car.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Creed asks him suspiciously. “Whose clothes are you wearing?”

Otter tries to act nonchalant, but outside hes sweating and inside he is storming. “Whats it look like Im doing?” he says. “Im leaving.”

“Leaving?” Creed almost shouts. “Where are you going?”

“I took that job in San Diego, Creed. And keep your voice down.” He doesnt look at Creed because he wont be able to take the recrimination in his eyes.

“You told me you turned that down,” Creed says accusingly. “Why the fuck would you be going if you turned it down?” And thats what Otter did tell Creed, because that is what he had done. You see, when Otter had found out that my mom had run out on us, he turned down the job the next day without question. He thought his place was by my side and that I needed him then more than ever. But since he knew he was just confusing me more, he felt it was better to put as much distance between us as possible. Hell call the studio on his way to see if the job is still available. If not, hell just get another one. Hes smart. He has a degree. Hell make it. Somehow.

“Its better this way,” he tells Creed.

“How is it better?” Creed shouts, losing control. “How can you look at the Kid and *promise* him youll stay here if you turn around and pull this shit! Hes never going to trust anyone again, and it will be all your fucking fault!”

Otter doesnt say anything, only because he is scared that Creed is right. It still doesnt deter him, though. He thinks its better for the Kid and I. Actually, hes only thinking of me, and this shames him more. He wants nothing more than to be able to be honest with someone. He wants to tell them how he feels. But it cannot be Creed. He imagines how that conversation would go, telling his brother of all the things he wishes he could do for me, with me, *to* me. He doesnt think that conversation would go over very well at all.

As if knowing whats going through his head, Creed barks, “What about Bear? Youre ready to walk out on him just like his mom did? What kind of fucking bastard are you, Otter? Just who the hell do you think you are?”

“Its better this way,” is the only thing he can say.

The ruckus brings down their parents, and it starts all over again. By the end, his dad has hard lines on his face and his mother is crying and Creed won't even look at him. He thinks that this is how he'll remember his family, and he doesn't know why, but it cements his decision even further. He stands in front of them awkwardly, waiting for someone to say something more, but it becomes apparent there's nothing left for any of them. He says good-bye to his mom and dad, who grudgingly let him go. When he gets to Creed, he almost recoils at the hatred he sees in his eyes. He hugs him roughly and whispers in his ear, "You have to watch out for them, okay? You have to because I can't." He thinks that's the end of it until Creed reels back from him and spits on his shoes and turns and walks away. He stares stupidly at the congealed saliva. He doesn't say another word to anyone and turns and leaves. He's almost out of Seafare when nausea overtakes him. He pulls over quickly to the side of the road and heaves and heaves and heaves until there's nothing left. While he's vacating the contents of his stomach, he can only think of me, wondering if I am awake yet or if Creed has called me. He doesn't know that Creed is too pissed off to be able to say anything, and that I won't be awakened for another half hour. He wipes the spittle hanging from his lips and gets back into his car and drives away.

The trip takes two days, and he goes through various stages of anger, remorse, denial. But mostly he replays the kiss over and over in his head. In a motel in Redding, California, he jerks off at the thought of our lips touching. He jerks off at what will never be. Before he comes, he whispers, "*Bear*," and then the orgasm starts at his toes and rips through his body. He cries out and closes his eyes, and all he can see is me. It's like I'm haunting him and no exorcism will cleanse him of me.

He arrives in San Diego and stays at the house of a friend he knew from college. He contacts the studio, and he's in luck: the position is still available. They seem surprised to hear from him and are even more surprised when he says he is in town. They offer him the job and tell him to come in the next day to fill out the paperwork. His friends want to go out and have a welcome celebration, but he begs off, saying he needs to start looking for an apartment. They nod and offer suggestions, and later, when it's just him by himself and it's dark and he's stretched out on the couch trying to sleep, he picks up his phone and pulls up my number and tries to call me. He stares at his phone for what feels like hours, but he cannot work up the nerve. He doesn't know what he would even say if I answered. He sighs and turns his phone off.

A few weeks go by. In that time, Otter finds a nice apartment, starts his job, and meets new and interesting people. He trades in his Chrysler and gets the Jeep. He finds out his nice apartment has cockroaches. He gets a tan. He goes to a gay bar. He has sex with someone who looks like me. He feels guilty. He does a photo shoot for a magazine. He photographs anything and everything. He makes friends. He goes hiking. And running. And walking. He does all these things and these things make up who hes becoming, but still he thinks of me. One night, he gets up the nerve and calls my number. His heart pounds, and his blood boils, and the phone rings, and he gets my voice mail. He thinks he shouldnt have expected any different but is shocked at how good it is to at least hear my voice on the voice mail message. He calls the number again, knowing I wont pick up. *“You’ve reached Bear’s phone. I’m not here right now, so leave me a message, and I’ll try to call you back. I’ll probably forget, though. Bye.”* He rocks back and forth.

A few days later, Creed calls him. Its the first time theyve spoken since he left. Creed is still very angry, but hes more willing to talk now that almost a month has passed. They talk about San Diego and about Otters work and the people hes met. Creed tells him of his plans for school in the fall and the final preparations hes making. They speak for a few minutes more until there is a lull in the conversation and both are dancing around the topic that has gone unsaid. Otter is the first to break and only because its like an itch in his head begging to be scratched.

“Hows Ty?” he asks casually, his voice betraying nothing.

“Fine, I guess. I havent really seen a lot of him since you left,” Creed responds.

“Oh, yeah? Whys that?”

Creed sighs. “I didnt call you to fight with you.”

This catches Otter off guard. “I didnt think you did,” he says, confused. “Why are we going to fight? I asked why you hadnt seen Ty.”

Creed sighs again. “Thats what we would fight about,” he says, his voice going flat. “I havent seen the Kid or Bear that much because theyre both messed up right now. You messed the Kid up royally, Otter. He freaks about everything now.”

Otter takes in a ragged breath.

“And Bear,” Creed continues. “Otter, Bear wont admit it, but I know that you leaving messed with him more than his mom leaving. He goes on pretending everything is okay, but Ive known him too long to swallow his bullshit. Its

like part of him died. You should try and call him.”

“I did!” Otter says, surprised when it comes out as a shout. “I did and he didnt answer!”

“Do you blame him?”

Otter doesnt. They talk for a few minutes more, but not about Ty and not about me. When Creed hangs up the phone, Otter throws it across the room and collapses on his bed. He falls right to sleep and dreams, and in the dream, I am standing right next to him, and he feels such happiness, but its like hes a ghost because no matter what he does or says, I dont respond. He wakes up alone.

Now that hes established contact with Creed, he thinks its okay for him to call people from home again. Over the next few months, he tries to make amends. He talks to his parents, and they are happy to hear from him. He tells them about his job, about the celebrities hes gotten to meet, the parties hes been invited to. They dont ask if hes met anyone, and he doesnt bring it up. His being gay has always led to uncomfortable conversation, and he doesnt want to have that now. He thinks its better if he doesnt say anything at all. They seem to agree. He loves his parents and they love him, but he thinks that can only get them all so far.

He calls Anna, who tells him up front that if hes calling to pump her for info on me, he can forget it. She says that Im very hurt by him but that if he wanted to know anything further, he would have to call me himself. He doesnt tell her that hes tried many times to call. He doesnt tell her that its almost a daily ritual to hear my voice mail. He doesnt tell her that he dreams of me almost every night, and of that kiss, that kiss that shouldnt have happened and that only lasted a few seconds but that still warms his heart every time he thinks of it. He doesnt tell her any of that, but when she asks him why he sounds so sad, he says without thinking, “I think I lost the only chance Ill ever have to be happy.” This breaks him further, and though Anna asks what he means, he refuses to tell her and changes the subject.

After he says good-bye to Anna, he walks into his bedroom and sits on the edge of his bed and looks over at the photograph that is on his nightstand. Its a large color photograph in an expensive frame. Its the only picture he has in his apartment. It was taken last year in the fall. A great storm was coming in off the ocean. Otter had gone with Creed and me to the beach to watch it roll in. Creed had run back up to the car to grab his jacket, and I had been standing between Otter and the ocean. The sky was a weird orangeish-green-

blue-black angry thing, and my hair was whipping in the wind, and I had a huge smile on my face. I turned to look at Otter, and right when my eyes found him, he snapped the picture. Its this picture he looks at now.

A few days later, hes speaking to Ty. Anna is babysitting him while I am at work. At first the Kid is hesitant and suspicious of talking to Otter. Otter feels sad at this but knows hes the only one to blame. Then he says something that makes the Kid laugh and the tension leaves, and Ty is soon happily babbling about anything and everything. Otter lets him go on and on and closes his eyes, happy to hear the Kids voice. He finally asks for Anna to be put back on the phone. Ty tells him that Anna has left the room, so hell have to go get her. Before he can stop himself, he tells the Kid to wait and asks him about me.

“Hes sad a lot,” the Kid says in a low voice. “But its a secret.”

“What do you mean?” Otter asks.

“Hes sad all the time, but he doesnt want anyone to know. He doesnt even want me to know, but I do. I wish he wasnt sad, Otter.”

Otter covers his eyes.

Months pass. He works. He plays. He drinks. He eats. He fucks. He loves his job. He hates his job. Hes happy. Hes sad. He thinks hes losing his mind. He thinks hes never been saner.

He doesnt go home that first Christmas because he doesnt think hes ready to. Hes stopped calling my phone so much. He only does it now to remember what I sound like. Sometimes he looks at the picture by his bed. Sometimes he puts it in drawer and leaves it there for days. Christmas comes and goes. New Years comes and goes. He toasts the future with some friends, and they all go around and say their resolutions. When its his turn, he makes up some bullshit about not drinking as much, to which everyone raises their glasses, too, and laugh, but inside he resolves to get over me, move on with his life. He tells himself theres no need to pine over some kid, and even though a little voice chides him for this, knowing full well Im not just some *kid*, his resolve is firm, and he realizes its the only way.

One day in June, hes surprised to see that hes been here for over a year.

Suddenly its Labor Day, and hes at a barbecue over at one of his clients houses. Hes having fun but is a little bored. Hes about to say good night, when the hostess brings over someone to meet him. Otters sitting down, and when he stands, he is facing a very cute guy. His name is Jonah, and hes tall and stocky and has black hair and blue eyes and his own house. It turns out

hes thirty and works in an advertising agency. He has a chocolate lab named Moxie and likes to ride motorcycles. Hes very smart and very handsome. They talk for the rest of the night.

They have their first date a few days later.

Its December 23rd and hes taking Jonah, whos going back east for Christmas, to the airport.

“Are you sure youre going to be okay here by yourself?” Jonah asks him.

Otter shrugs. “It wont be too bad. Theres some prints that I need to go over, and I promised some friends of mine Id go over to their house for dinner.”

Jonah looks concerned. “Why dont you just go home? Im sure your family would love to see you. And you can check in on your friend? What was his name? Tiger?”

“Bear,” Otter says and suddenly wants to go home and look at my picture. Hes moved it from the side of his bed to his closet because he didnt think Jonah would understand. He hasnt told Jonah what happened between him and me and doesnt think he ever will. He knows that if he can just give it enough time, he could love Jonah. He believes he really could.

“Bear, then,” Jonah says, waving his hand dismissively in a way that irritates Otter. “You should see all of them. After all, its Christmas.”

Hes watching Jonah walk away into the terminal, when he decides that Jonah is right. Hes been gone for far too long. He hurries home and buys a plane ticket online. Its expensive and isnt until Christmas Day, but its worth it. He takes my picture out of the closet and sits on the floor and stares at it until the heaviness that is always in his heart loosens, just a little bit. He feels like hes cheating on Jonah, but he cant help it. Being with Jonah has made him feel like hes cheating on me, even though I was never his to begin with. He thinks hes a monster.

As he drives to the airport, hes filled with nervous excitement. As hes on the plane, hes filled with quiet dread. As the plane lands, hes filled with large doses of panic. As he drives the rental car, hes absolutely terrified. As he pulls into the driveway and sees my car, hes about to pass out. As he opens the kitchen door and sees me alone, he thinks it looks like Ive been waiting for him. He cant help but grin. He doesnt hesitate. He drops his bag and rushes quickly to me and wraps his arms around me. He inhales and feels my body against his, and he feels my arms start to rise up around him, and hes already planning in his head to move back, and he doesnt understand how in Gods name he had left in the first place. He knows I am still dating Anna, and

he knows hell never have me the way he wants, but at least he can be near me. He thinks its all going to be okay. Then I pull away from him, and its like a kick to the balls, and he doesnt know what to do.

He follows me into the living room and tries to think of things to say. By the time hes settled on something sort of witty, hes in the living room, and his parents are standing with happy surprise, wrapping their arms around him. Creed stands up and pounds his back happily. Ty jumps up, and Otter catches him in outstretched arms and spins him around. Otter looks at me, but Im not looking at him. My jaw is tense and my brow furrowed, and so many things run through his mind, and he cant focus clearly. Throughout the night, he asks me questions that I ignore or answer to someone else. Eventually he stops and just looks at me. No one else notices anything wrong. Otter thinks its his fault that Ive become so cold. Its his fault Ive changed.

Throughout the week, he feels like hes on a roller coaster and cant get off. He wakes in the mornings, sure this is going to be the day that he will get to see me. He goes to bed at night dejected. The morning comes, and it starts all over. He sees Anna when she comes over and is overjoyed to see Ty with her. He waits expectantly for me to follow, but I dont. He doesnt know then that he wont see me again for another year and a half.

Two days later, hes talking with Jonah on the phone. Jonah is happy Otter decided to go home for the holidays. Jonah tells him he cant wait to see him. Otter tells him it is cold and raining in Seafare. Jonah tells him how much hes missed him. Otter tells him of a movie that he wants to see when he gets back. Jonah says he got him a Christmas present that hes just going to love. Otter is about to tell him that he has to go, when he stops. He thinks again that he could love this man if he gave him the chance. He thinks that he could find some semblance of happiness if only he let himself. He tries to get back into the conversation, but hes tired, and his heart is just not in it. Jonah hears something in his voice and asks him about it.

“Its nothing. Im just tired,” Otter says. He has a headache now.

“Did you get to see your friend?” Jonah asks. “The one with the kid?”

“Uh. Yeah. Yes, I did. A few days ago,” Otter says, wishing Jonah would stop talking.

“How is he?”

“Fine. Hes fine.” And I am, and he knows this, and it hurts him. Not because he wanted to see me suffer but because he can claim no credit to my current situation. After all, hes the one thats run away.

“Otter?” Jonah asks. “Did you...” He hesitates. “Did you ever date him?” Otter laughs harshly. “No. Hes straight. Why would you ask that?”

“I dont know. Anytime youve ever mentioned him, you get this weird tone in your voice, and I guess I just assumed.” Jonah sounds relieved, and Otter finds this strange. But he opens his mouth and suddenly finds himself about to tell him what really happened between us. He utters the first word but then stops. He blinks, confused. Why had he stopped? Why had he started? He thinks he wont tell Jonah now because he doesnt yet trust him completely. He thinks he wont say anything because it doesnt matter. But he knows the real reason in his heart. He doesnt tell Jonah because its a secret, *our* secret, and to Otter, this is almost sickly romantic.

The day comes when Otter has to go home. Hes exhausted because hes spent the entire previous night trying to compose a letter to me. There are different versions: some are pages and pages of ramblings and others are a sentence long. Nothing seems to come out right. Finally he comes up with something that he is satisfied with. Its not perfect, but he doesnt want to babble. It says:

I know you were hurt and have every reason to be angry, but just know that there hasn't been a day that has gone by that I haven't thought about you and Ty. Maybe that's my punishment, knowing you are doing well and knowing I had nothing to do with it. For what it's worth, I'm proud of you, for having done so great despite people breaking their promises to you.

It was good to see you, even if it was only for a moment. I am glad I got at least that. I've missed you, Papa Bear.

He thinks it says everything he wanted to say. He thinks it says everything he cant. He thinks it sounds like a love letter. He thinks he wrote too much. He thinks he didnt write enough. He thinks it sounds stupid. He thinks it will never get read.

He thinks it sounds like a good-bye.

Hes taking Ty home. Part of him wanted to leave a lot earlier so he could go upstairs and force me to talk to him. He doesnt, scared of what I would say, scared of what *he* would say. He tells himself that he would not do that, not in front of Ty. So he waits, leaving late enough that it will give him time to drop Ty off and get to the airport. He watches Ty run up the stairs, and he lifts up my windshield wiper, putting the letter on my car. He pauses for a moment, willing me to fling open the door and run down the stairs and jump into his arms saying, “Please, Otter, please dont leave me again. Please stay with me and promise to stay forever.” He shakes his head and gets back into

the car and drives away. Its raining. He turns in the car to the rental desk. He gets on a plane. The plane takes off. The plane lands. He gets off the plane. Its sunny outside.

Eight days later, he and Jonah have their first fight. Theyve had a couple of petty squabbles in the past few months, but its always been resolved quickly. Otters in his bedroom, staring down at my picture, cursing himself for being so weak. Since he has come back from Oregon, that old familiar sadness has become ever more prevalent. Hes spent the last week alternating between hot and cold. He sighs again and doesnt hear the front door open. He doesnt hear Jonah until Jonah is in his room. Hes startled when Jonah says his name and feels his face redden as he hastily shoves the picture into his closet.

“What are you doing?” Jonah asks him. “Why are you sitting on the floor?”

Otter stands up and tries to smile, but it feels fake. “Nothing. I was just looking at... some stuff. What are you doing here?”

Jonah shrugs. “I got off early and wanted to see if you were hungry. I tried calling you, but you didnt pick up. The door was open when I got here. What picture was that?”

“Its nothing.”

“Are you sure?” Jonah asks, sounding concerned. “You look upset.”

“Lets go eat,” Otter says, avoiding Jonahs gaze. He shuts his closet door to Jonah and gives him a quick peck on the lips. “Give me a moment to wash up.” He walks past him and goes into the bathroom and shuts the door. He looks at himself in the mirror. His face is pale and his eyes are bloodshot. He tells himself hes got to get it together. He tells himself to grow up. He washes his face. He brushes his teeth. He fixes his hair. When hes done, he looks better, but he doesnt feel better.

He walks out of the bathroom and freezes when he sees Jonah standing in front of his closet. The door is open, and my picture is in his hands. A dark feeling rises up through Otter then, at the sight of the picture in someone elses hands. Its a feeling of jealousy, of possessiveness. He almost runs to Jonah and snatches the picture out of his surprised hands. Jonah recoils when he sees the look on Otters face.

“Dont touch this,” Otter snarls at him.

“Who is it?” Jonah demands. “Why did you act so guilty when I walked in?”

“Its none of your business who this is!” Otter shoots back. “And I wasnt acting guilty!”

Jonah crosses his arms and stands defiantly in front of Otter. “You acted like

I was your mom whod just caught you jerking off!” he says angrily. “I come in and find my boyfriend staring at a picture of another guy and then trying to hide it!”

Otter is seething. “I wasnt trying to hide anything!”

Jonah shakes his head. “Ever since you came back from Oregon, youve been acting like someone died. What the hell happened to you up there? Does it have to do with him?” he asks, grabbing the picture from Otters hands.

Jonah never knows how close he comes to being laid out. Otters first instinct is to punch Jonah in the face, and he raises his arm up halfway and is about to cock it back when he stops. *I can’t do this* he thinks, horrified at his upraised arm. *I’m not that kind of person. What the fuck am I doing?* He drops his arm back down to his side. Hes still angry, but the fight is falling out of him. He feels a familiar wave of despair start to wash over him, and he wants Jonah to leave so he can go to sleep. Hes tired and hurting and not in the mood to deal with anyone.

But Jonahs not done. “Is this that kid?” he asks, and Otter winces. “It is, isnt it? Its that kid from your hometown!”

“So what if it is?” Otter says warily.

“Did you sleep with him when you went back?” Jonah asks, his voice hard.

“No,” Otter says, wishing Jonah would leave. “I told you, hes straight.”

Jonah drops the picture on the bed and starts pacing in front of it. “Ive heard that before,” Jonah says bitterly. “Fucking straight guys who want nothing to do with you after you suck them off. Is that what this asshole did to you?”

Otters moving before he realizes it. Hes standing in front of Jonah. His teeth are grit together, and its all he can do to keep from ripping his fucking head off. “Hes not like that,” Otter hisses. “Dont you ever speak badly about him again.”

“Or what?” Jonah shouts at him. “Are you going to kick my ass? What the hell did you do?”

“Nothing! We never did anything!” Otter bellows, his voice breaking. “We never did anything.”

Jonahs face softens considerably. “And that was the problem, wasnt it?” he says slowly.

The dam breaks then, and Otter spills forth. He tells Jonah about the first time he knew he had felt something toward me and how wrong it had made him feel. I was sixteen, and he was twenty-four, and I had stayed over with Creed one night when their parents were out of town. Creed got stupid drunk and

passed out early on the couch in the living room. Otter and I stayed up the entire night, talking about anything and everything. He says there was a moment when I was trying to think of an answer to a question he no longer remembers. I had leaned forward and put my face on my hands and scrunched up my eyebrows in concentration. Otter says it wasn't until he was in bed later replaying the conversation in his head that it had hit him. No longer was I like a little brother in his eyes.

He tells Jonah of this and more. But he does not tell Jonah about the kiss, for it is still his and mine and no one else's. He thinks it will stay that way for as long as he lives. He knows that I will never be his, and he knows he may never even see me again, but at least he has this memory.

Jonah is silent for a long time after he finishes speaking. His face is a mask. Finally he asks if they should break up. Otter knows they should, because he can't promise anything to Jonah. But he allows himself to be selfish. He hugs Jonah violently and begs him not to leave. Jonah shudders against him and says he will stay, even though he knows it's against his better judgment. Otter does not release him for a long time.

The next week, he puts the picture in a storage unit he had rented out when he first arrived. He kisses it once before he leaves.

Six months later, he moves in with Jonah.

He's happy. Work is good. Jonah is great. Life is good. He has a great tan. He has good friends. He has great sex. He makes good money. He has a great boyfriend. His life is very full. He could not ask for anything more. He talks to Anna and Creed every now and then, and he doesn't ask about me and no one says anything to him. But that's okay. He is not thinking about me that much anymore. I'm still in his thoughts, but it's white noise in the back of his head. He's okay with this. The equilibrium works. He tells himself he's making it work. He tells himself it has to work.

Everything is good and great for a while. And then it stops.

He finds himself dissatisfied with work. He's always considered himself an artist. He knows he does great work, as he's been told this by many people. He's very humble with his talent, but he knows he has the potential to become even better. He also knows that sometimes artists don't achieve the end goal that they set for themselves. Sometimes it's too high, sometimes it's just not possible. He begins to see this as he looks over projects he has going on in various stages of development. They're all shit. They'll all have to be scrapped. He has to start everything all over again. When he tries this, he finds he

doesn't have any ideas. He has no inspiration. Everything he touches is insipid, it's mundane, it's boring.

Jonah begins talking of rings and commitments and forever. There are whispers that California will soon legalize gay marriage. Jonah never fully proposes, but the intent is there, and Otter finds himself crazily hoping that gay marriage will be banned. He wants to find whatever ballot it's on and vote against it. He wants to find whatever judge is considering it and protest outside their office. He wants to rally all the conservatives to make sure that gays will never be able to get married. He considers joining the Tea Party. He concocts evil plots in his head. He begins to lose his interest in sex, but that's okay because Jonah is working a lot lately, and he doesn't seem to be that interested anyway.

This goes on for months. Otter thinks he's going insane.

That's when the real crazy stuff starts to happen

He's at work, poring over prints for a promotion he's helping to run through Jonah's firm. Nothing turned out like he wanted it to. He curses softly and rubs his eyes. He can feel a headache coming on. He's about to pick up the phone and call Jonah when someone walks by the studio storefront. People travel on this sidewalk all day, so he's unsure why this person catches his eye. Unsure, that is, until he sees him full-on. One minute he's dialing the phone and the next he's dropped it onto the floor, where it breaks. He bolts for the front door, his heart pounding, his mind racing. He's just seen me, you see, just seen me walk past the door. It's not a coincidence, and he knows it. If I'm there, in San Diego, walking past this particular place, then I'm there for him. He shoves open the door and looks wildly around. He sees me further down the road walking away. He shouts, "*Bear! Bear!*" as he runs. People stare at him as he shoves past. He doesn't care. I'm here, and everything is going to be okay.

This all ends when he catches up with the person. It's not me. It doesn't even look like me.

Three weeks later, the same thing happens again.

And again and again and again.

Otter thinks he's sick. He goes to the doctor. They do many tests. He's poked and prodded and X-rayed and CAT-scanned and MRId and gives blood and urine. Two weeks later he's told he's perfectly healthy, at least in body. He tries to believe this, but I am one of the paramedics who rushed past him on his way up to meet with the doctor.

He thinks that maybe this is just an unhealthy obsession. He goes to a therapist. The therapist pokes and prods and asks if hes ever considered yoga. Or meditation. Or Xanax. Otter is told he needs to relax. Hes told that hes projecting. Hes told he needs to cut back on the stresses in his life. Hes told to take a long vacation.

He and Jonah go to Florida for a week. Im checking them into the hotel. Im the bellboy. Im the cab driver, the bartender, the waiter, the person on the street who passes by. By the end of the week, its the beginning of March, and Otter starts to think about going home.

Two weeks later, Otter finds himself at the self-storage unit. He hasnt been here in over a year. He opens the door, and the picture is where hes left it. He picks it up and takes it home. He hides it in a box in the closet. He takes it out whenever hes feeling sad. He takes it out whenever hes feeling happy. He wonders if the guilt of the past three years is finally catching up with him. He thinks its guilt making him see me everywhere. He cant possibly still have those strong feelings for me like he did. He thinks he just needs to make sure Im okay. He thinks he should go home for a few weeks, just to make amends. He talks to Creed and Anna more frequently now, and they tell him Im fine every time he asks, but he needs to see this for himself.

Its the middle of May now, and he comes home one day and finds Jonah sitting at the kitchen table, Moxie at his feet. My picture sits on the table. Otter freezes for a moment before continuing into the kitchen. Hes just told the studio that he needs to take some time off. Theyre calling it a leave of absence. Hes calling it a vacation from reality. He hasnt yet told Jonah of his plans, but he was sure he could think of something. Now, it would seem, he wont have to.

There is a fight and it is epic. Theres screaming and crying and accusations and kissing and making up and pleading and tears and anger and bitterness: a full gamut of emotion. Jonah tells Otter that he slept with someone from his office three months ago, and hes been trying to figure out how to tell him. He says it didnt mean anything. He says that he doesnt feel as bad now, knowing Otter is cheating as well. It might be with a picture or a memory or a feeling, but its still cheating. Otter tells him to go to hell. Jonah says hes sorry and he loves him. Otter believes him. Otter even loves Jonah in his own way. He thinks Jonah is a good man and that its not Jonahs fault he got wrapped up in this. He tells Jonah all of this, and Jonah seems to calm until Otter pulls out his suitcases and starts packing. He starts begging then, but Otters course has

already been set. Jonah asks him where hes going. Otter tells him the truth. Jonah asks him if he is coming back. Otter says he doesnt know. Otter tells him hes not coming here to try and be with me, but to make amends for the shit storm hes caused. He kisses a crying Jonah lightly before getting into the Jeep and driving away. Before he goes, he makes sure the picture is tucked safely in his bags.

He takes his time on the drive back to Seafare. He rehearses what he will say. He tests all of my reactions. He comes up with different rebuttals. Hes happy. Hes sad. He feels bad for Jonah and even calls him on the third day after hed left. He gets voice mail but thats okay. He leaves a message but does not say, “I love you” at the end. Otter leaves California and crosses into Oregon and doesnt know if hell ever go back.

So o THAT’s what happened. I came back, and you know the rest. I saw you

were doing fine. Actually, you were doing better than fine; you were doing amazing. You didn’t need me here, and I never really got to apologize the way I wanted to. I am sorry I left you, Bear. I am sorry that you’ve had to endure the last three years when I could have been here to make it easier. I’m sorry about a lot of things. I don’t know what it is we’re doing right now, and I don’t know if it will even last, but I don’t want to go anywhere again unless you’re with me. I didn’t think I still felt like that. But you want to know the moment I realized it all over again? When I looked at you and felt like the fight for you was all I’ve ever known?

It was when you threw my letter back at me. You took out your wallet and you threw that damn letter at my face. I told myself it was stupid to think like that, that maybe you kept it as a reminder of how much I had hurt you. But part of me couldn’t help but... hope. Even if nothing ever comes of this, I want you in my life. Anywhere you go, I want to be there. I’ve missed you, Papa Bear. God, how I’ve missed you. I don’t want to miss you ever again.

He strokes my hair. His heart beats in my ear. I rise and fall on his chest with every breath he takes. I sit up and stare deep into the gold-green of his eyes. Hes the first to break away. He looks down at his hands. I reach out and lift up his head. I wipe away a tear. He leans into my hand and kisses my palm. I think this is a dream. Ive fallen asleep while he was speaking and this is a dream.

The fight for you was all I've ever known, he said to me. This is a dream. This is a dream.

I bring my other hand up and cup his face in my hands. He closes his eyes.

Can you do this? the voice asks. *Can you handle all of this?*

“Otter,” I say gently. “Look at me.” He does.

I kiss him.

God help me.

7. Where Bear Keeps Secrets

O_{KAY}, so we *all* saw that coming. It doesnt mean it makes it any easier.

I_{WAKE} to the sound of a phone going off somewhere near my ear. My mind is blurry and the bed is warm, and I want nothing more than for that fucking phone to shut the hell up so I can curl back under my covers and fall right back asleep. But it doesnt. It continues to play some song Ive never heard before. When did I put that song on my phone? I reach out from underneath the covers blindly and finally find the offensive object and open it and put it against my ear.

“This better be good,” I growl.

“Bear?” a voice says, sounding surprised.

“Yeah, what. Who is this?”

“Its Creed.”

I stretch my legs and feel something against me but dont open my eyes. Its too nice keeping them closed. “Creed, why the fuck are you calling me so early?” I groan.

He sounds strange. “Uh, dude, I didnt. I called Otter. Why are you answering his phone?” he asks, and a hand falls gently on my side.

My eyes flash open, sleep the furthest thing from my mind. “Bear?” I hear a tinny voice say in my ear. “Dude?”

I look over at the other side of the bed. My movement has knocked the

covers back and Otter lays sprawled out beside me. He lies on his stomach, his head turned to the side, facing me. His eyes are closed, and he hasnt a care in the goddamn world. His hand is still on my thigh, hot and hard through the fabric of the clothes I wear. His clothes. I cant help but stare at him, strong and tall and tan and... and....

“Bear?”

“Uh... yeah?” I say hoarsely, trying to keep my voice down.

“What are you doing?” Creed demands. “Why do you have Otters phone?”

Oh, Bear! it laughs. I can't wait to see you work your way out of this one! Just what are you going to say to him? That his big brother bared his HEART and SOUL to you? That when he was done, you had never been more fucking aroused in your entire life? That even though you were scared of what it meant, that you thought once or twice that his admitted obsession will tear

you apart piece by piece, that even beyond all that, you couldn't help but groan when you felt his BIG, STRONG ARMS wrap around you, and he started to SUCK on your TONGUE....

"I... I was here because... Otter wanted to make breakfast for Ty," I finally choke out. It sounds lame even to me.

"Its really early," Creed says. "Otter never wakes up before ten unless he has to."

Goddammit, Creed! I curse. Just shut the hell up and believe everything I'm saying! Im panicking now. I want to kick Otter awake and make him help me. I want to hang up the phone and grab Ty and get the hell out of there. I want to leave him with Mrs. Paquinn and go to Annas house and beg her to take me back. I want to fuck her senseless so I can stop feeling my cock growing hard at his touch. I want Otter to run back to San Diego and go back to the stupid fucking boyfriend, who Ive never met but cannot stand. I want to ask Anna to marry me, and then well get a house and have babies and grow old together, and Ill never have to remember any of this, and if I do, Ill look back on it with fond disdain, knowing it was just a phase.

Uh-oh! the voice cackles gleefully. Trouble in paradise already? And things were going so WELL! But hey! Keep lying to yourself like that, Papa Bear! We both know you want nothing more than to crawl back under the covers and press your body against his and forget the way the world really works. But you just keep on thinking of marriage and kids and a future that will never be. What's the point of life if you never second-guess EVERY DECISION YOU MAKE?

"I guess he wanted to get an early start," I say weakly.

Creed laughs in my ear. "Does that mean youve got him to stop moping?"

You could say something like that....

"Uh, sure," I grunt. "I dont think youll have to worry anymore."

"Thats my boy!" he howls into the phone. "I dont know what you did, but thank God you did *something*. I dont feel so bad about not coming home when I said I was."

"What?" I say half-listening. I am trying to slide my leg out from underneath Otters hand without waking him. It doesnt work too well, as he curls his arm around my whole leg and hugs it gently to his chest.

"Im going to stay up here for a few more days," Creed says, completely oblivious to the fact that his best friend is partially stuck underneath his older brother. "Another friend of mine came up, so I wont be back until Friday. I

just wanted to check in and make sure that things were cool. Sounds like youve got everything under control.”

“Yep,” I say, resigned. “Everythings cool here.”

“Good,” he says with a laugh. “So Ill see you when I get back, okay? Tell Otter when Ill be home so I dont walk in on him fucking some guy on the floor in the living room.”

My face grows hot. I try to picture something like that, knowing its probably not the best time to be doing so. We had made out last night to the point where I started to wonder what would happen if I took off Otters shirt, but I had stopped myself. Otter had respected this and seemed content to just be near me. I havent really thought through the... *mechanics*... of what the next possible steps could be. Images flash through my head, and my mouth grows dry.

“Sure,” I say, trying to brush a naked Otter out of my thoughts. “Ill let him know.”

“Thanks, dude.” Im about to hang up, when he excitedly says my name.

“What?” I say, annoyed.

“Make sure that you get Mrs. Paquinn to be able to watch the Kid the last Saturday in August. We are going to throw a motherfucking party like Seafares never seen before I leave. I got some people coming into town, and I figure it could be like a last hurrah before I have to go back and be an adult.”

“That sounds... nice,” I say.

“You sure youre okay? You sound weird.”

“Me?” I squeak. “Oh, Im just great. No worries here.”

“If you say so. Be cool, Papa Bear.” And he disconnects.

I sigh and hang up the phone, and Otter bursts out laughing. It startles me for a moment because I thought he was still asleep. He lets go of my leg and rolls over onto his back, clutching his stomach and bellowing out laughter. I glare at him and cross my arms. “Whats so fucking funny?” I scowl.

“„Everythings cool h-here?” he sputters, mocking me. “You s-sounded like you were going to throw up through t-the whole phone call!”

My eyes narrow. “You were awake for the entire conversation?”

He nods, wiping his eyes.

I kick him on the leg. “Why the hell didnt you help me?” I shout.

I raise my leg to kick him again, but hes too fast for me. As soon as my foot shoots out, he rolls over nimbly onto it and squashes it into the bed. Im pissed, so I raise my hands to beat him off me, but he reaches up and grabs

both my arms with one big paw and pulls me down onto the bed. He pushes my arms to the sides and pins them with his knees and straddles my stomach. It happens so quickly that I have no time to react. He smiles down at me wickedly, his intent naked on his face. I glare up at him, a sneer twisted on my lips. He cocks his head to the side.

“Everything cool here, Bear?” he says through his grin.

“Get the fuck off me, Otter!” I say, trying to twist and wiggle out from underneath him. Its no use. Hes too big, and the grinding of our hips isnt exactly supporting my cause, either.

“Good morning to you too,” he says, arching his eyebrow. He leans forward until his face is a few inches from mine. I dont move, not wanting to be the one who shows weakness here. I wont lose this game. His nose touches mine, and it distracts me from what hes really doing, and when his hand comes up and he starts tickling me, my eyes bulge and I start squealing like a girl. My mind goes blank, and I try to break free, and I scream at him shrilly, to no avail. His face is still down near mine, and I do the only thing I can: I reach up and grab his bottom lip with my teeth and pull none too gently. He immediately stops tickling me and doesnt move. I jerk my head lightly to the side, threateningly.

“You gonna stop?” I say through a mouthful of Otter.

“Depends on what youre going to do next,” he says and presses his face against mine, taking my mouth in his. I kiss him back even as the alarms go off in my head. I grimace slightly as we both taste like we gargled dead animals, but he sticks his tongue in my mouth, and my hands go to his back and rub the landscape there through the shirt. He lays down flat against me, and I can feel him pressing against my leg, and I find the place where his shirt has lifted up from his ass and my hand touches bare skin and my brain shorts out again as I slide a tentative fingertip underneath the waistband of his shorts....

“Bear?” a little voice calls from the other side of the closed door.

My hand freezes. My eyes open wide, and Otter quickly rolls off me to the side. He pulls the covers up around his waist, but not before I can see his dick outlined through his shorts, hard and bulging against the fabric. I look down at myself and see the same, and so does he, and he has a brief moment to stare hungrily at me before the door opens and the Kid makes his entrance. I bring the comforter up around my lap before he sees too much.

“Whats up, Ty?” I say, my voice coming out deep and rough.

Ty jumps up onto the bed and sits on the end of it. "Were you guys fighting again?" he asks us accusingly. "Bear, you woke me up because you were screaming."

I blush and avert my eyes. "Er, no," I stammer, scooting as far away from Otter as I can without falling off the bed. "Otter was... he was..." I don't know how to finish. I might be in possession of the smartest nine-year-old vegetarian ecoterrorist-in-training but there's some things even *he* shouldn't be told. Especially when I don't even know what the hell I'm doing.

The Kid looks at me expectantly, and I open my mouth to make something up when Otter comes to my rescue. "I was tickling him," he says soberly. I shoot him a look that tells him I will be kicking his ass later, and he shrugs and grins his grin.

Ty laughs. "That's why Bear sounded like a girl," he tells Otter. "He always does when you tickle him." I scowl at the both of them as they laugh at me some more. Otter reaches over and ruffles the Kid's hair, and Ty smiles so beautifully at him that I let the pseudo-anger wash out of me. I dare you to try and stay mad when you have a fake-son who smiles like that and a guy lying next to you who, up until two minutes ago, was doing things to you that you've never even thought about.

Ty jumps off the bed and walks to the door. "I'm going to go watch MSNBC. It would sure be good if I had some waffles to go with it," he calls back to us as he leaves.

"There are cartoons on," Otter shouts after him.

"*Cartoons?*" he says incredulously. "Otter, I'm *nine* now, not some little kid." Otter looks at me indignantly. "What do you expect?" I ask him. "He's *nine* now." He grins and reaches for me, but his phone rings again. He groans as I hand to him. I stand to follow Ty and am almost at the door when I hear him leap up from the bed, and he grabs my hand and whirls me around and kisses me again.

I hiss and pull back. "The Kid is awake!" I whisper to him. He rolls his eyes and a shadow briefly crosses his face, and I can't quite place what it is. He shakes it off and grins crookedly, and as he puts the phone against his ear, he says "You owe me," as he pokes me gently in the chest. He says hello into the phone, and I'm about to turn and leave when I see the smile slide quickly off of his face.

"Oh, hey," he says into the phone. "What's up?" He sees me still standing in the room and covers the phone and says he'll be right down. I nod and walk

out of the room and am about to head down the stairs when I hear him say, “What do you want, Jonah?” This causes me to stop.

Have you ever tried to eavesdrop on a phone conversation? It sucks. Big-time. Its one-sided, and you wish you could see the person on the other end. Not that you *want* to know what they look like or anything, but because you want to put a face to a name. You hear the person near you say things like, “Why would you say that?” and “Jonah, I dont know what youre talking about,” and all you can do is imagine what is being said to make a person respond like that. It doesnt help either when you start to feel something strangely like jealousy, and it burns away at your insides like acid. You try to grapple with this and shove it away, but you lose, and it envelops you completely. You ball your fists and grit your teeth and hear the person say, “What do you expect me to do?” and you think, *I expect you to hang up the phone*, and you almost reel at the thought because you dont know where it came from. You start to feel queasy at how strong this sensation is. You wonder why youve never really felt jealousy before until now (not that its *really* jealousy or anything; this is all hypothetical), and you start to question if youre getting in over your head, and you start to think that maybe the last twelve hours have been a big mistake and that life was perfectly fine before a certain someone (who happens to be on the phone with a certain someone else) ever came home. You begin to distrust yourself and the person in the other room who is now saying, “I never meant for you to think like that!” and you smile sickly to yourself at how quickly all of this is happening to you. You never asked for this, did you? You were good before. Peachy fucking keen, even. And then you cant make out the next words that are said, and you inch closer to the room, knowing what you just didnt hear was probably the thing you wanted to hear the most. As you are almost back in the room, you freeze because you hear the phone slap shut and you hear a sigh. You then turn, shamefaced, and leave quickly before youre caught.

Ever been in that position?

Im just asking.

On SUNDAY morning, Ty comes to me with a request that catches me off guard. I know I should have been expecting it at some point, but when he asks, it throws me for a loop. I mean, with all thats been going on as of late, I thought that we were miles away from here. And damn if it doesnt sort of hurt.

“You what?” I say to him, disbelieving what Id just heard.

He sighs and sits on the couch next to me. “You know how I dont have

school tomorrow because its a grading day for teachers?” I nod. I have to work later on today and was planning on taking Ty to Otters before I went.

“Well, my friend from school wants me to stay the night at his house tonight,” he says patiently, as if Im the child and hes the adult.

“Do you want to go?” I say slowly.

He sits back on our couch and scrunches his face. “I think I do,” he says finally. “But if I wanted to come home, would you come get me?” he adds quickly.

“Of course,” I say sullenly. “Either me or Otter, if Im still at work.” I shake my head. “Who is this kid? How do you know him? Have I met him? Have I met his parents?”

He rolls his eyes. “Yes, Bear. I told you, hes my friend from school. You met him *and* his parents at my birthday party. Remember Alex Herrera? His mom was the one who asked you where you got the jumping castle from because she wants one for his birthday next month. You said Alex was very polite.”

Its funny, I know, but I havent had to face this yet. The Kid seemed content on not having sleepovers or play dates or anything like most normal kids do. Sure, he would go outside and play, but he never went over to someone elses house. I begin to think that this is going to be much harder on *me* than it is on *him*. *Have I really gotten so dependent on him?* I think, bemused. *I always thought it was the other way around. Do parents feel like this when their kid goes off for the first time like this? Jesus Christ, I need a life.*

The next thing I know Im on the phone with Mrs. Herrera, whos telling me of course its okay that Ty is coming over, and how sweet and intelligent he is. She wonders out loud why the Kid and Alex have never had a slumber party before, and I tell her Ty doesnt eat meat and that if he needs anything to just call me. Or Otter. Or Anna. Or Creed. Ty looks mortified as I make Mrs. Herrera recite the phone numbers back to me. She says that yes, she knows the number to Poison Control. No, they dont have any big dogs. Yes, she knows not to let Ty go to the beach by himself. No, shes quite sure that its not expected to rain, but shell keep him inside if it does. Yes, shes positive I dont need to pack any special vegetarian meals. Shes telling me that no, she *doesn't* know CPR, and Im about to tell her this is not a good night for this, maybe next time, when Ty kicks me in the shins, and I tell her Ill drop him off on my way to work.

I make Ty take his cell-phone charger so his phone can be charged in case he needs to call me for anything. He says that hell keep it charged in case I need

to call *him* for anything. We pack his bag, and I put in four changes of clothes, and he scowls at me and takes some of them out. I make sure he has his toothbrush (and toothpaste and floss and mouthwash and Childrens Tylenol and Band-Aids and tweezers). He stops me when I am packing a Tupperware dish filled with almond granola because Ill be *damned* if hell go hungry because all theyre serving is a rack of lamb in pork sauce with a side of meatloaf. He takes me to the couch and has another talk with me. I sit with my hands in my lap and nod.

When hes not looking, I pack the granola anyway.

“You going to be okay?” he asks as we pull out of our apartment parking lot. I glance in the rearview mirror and see how pale my face looks.

“Are *you* going to be okay?” I retort, not liking his amused expression.

“Ill be fine, Papa Bear,” he says calmly. “But even if I decide to stay the whole night, can I still call you tonight before I go to bed?” I smile and say yes, and we both relax, and its not until later that Ill realize hes said that more for my benefit than his.

“What are you going to do tonight?” he asks me as we pull into his friends neighborhood. “You probably shouldnt stay by yourself.”

I snort. “You kidding me?” I tell him. “Its my first night without you hanging all over me. Im gonna go out and party.”

He looks at me knowingly. “You should just go to Otters,” he says as he stares back out the window. “That way, Ill know where you are and know that youre okay.”

“That Im okay?” I ask him bewildered. “Why wouldnt I be okay?”

Hes silent for a moment, and Im about to ask him again when he says, “I know youll be okay. But I know youll be *more* okay if youre with Otter.” He looks at me again. “Does that make sense?”

I shake my head. “Explain it to me.” I honestly dont know whats going through his head. I know he cant possibly know about... you know, *us* (i.e. whatever it is Im doing with Otter), but I also know hes more perceptive than anyone Ive ever known. Im curious to see what hes picked up.

He sighs. “I made Otter promise me that hell take care of you,” he tells me. “Remember when we were at his house a couple of nights ago for a sleepover? Thats what I whispered to him.”

“Whyd you ask him that?” I say, opting not to tell him that I already knew.

“Because, Bear. Youve taken care of me my whole life, practically, and Im not big enough to take care of you yet. Otter is.”

I pull the car over in front of the Herrera house. I put the car in park and cup the back of the Kids head and press my forehead against his. He hums happily and plays with my fingers. "Youve done a damn good job taking care of me," I tell him quietly. "More than anyone in the world."

He smiles at me. "I am trying," he says seriously. "But Otter..." He stops. "But Otter what?" I press gently.

He shrugs. "Otter makes you smile. I know I do too," he says quickly, as I open my mouth to interject. "But youve been sad for a very long time, and I couldnt figure out why, and then I knew."

"And what did you know, Kid?"

He looks at me funny, like I shouldnt even have to ask. "You were sad," he says, "because Otter was gone. But now hes back, and youre not sad anymore. And that makes me hope that hell never leave again."

I smile sadly at my little adult and kiss his forehead. His friend opens the front door to the house, and Mrs. Herrera waves from behind him, and Ty unbuckles his seat belt and grabs his overnight bag out of the backseat of the car. He opens the door and yells hi to his friend and grins at me over his shoulder, and then hes gone too. I watch him run up to the front door, and he turns and waves back at me, and I wave frantically at him, and then theyre inside, and the door is shut. I turn the car around and drive away, feeling strangely alone. Then my phone beeps, telling me Ive got a new text message from the Kid.

love u Papa Bear

"THE Kids the one that asked to stay the night at a friends house?" Otter asks me a few hours later, when Im on my break. "Uh-oh. Howre you holding up?"

I switch my phone to my other ear and kick the ground. "What do you mean how am I holding up?" I say bitterly. "I've never been better." Obviously.

He snickers in my ear. "You sound like it." He pauses for a moment and then says, "Maybe this is a good thing, Bear. Maybe hes finally starting to trust the world again." I know this is hard for him to say, as we both know hes a big reason the Kid lost that trust in the first place. Its not all Otters fault, of course, but it certainly didnt help, either. I think of six mean things to say, but I let it go. I must be getting old.

"I guess youre right," I sigh. "I just thought this wouldnt happen until he was at least thirty."

"Its good its happening now," he tells me gently. "I think that hes going to start becoming his own person. But you... youve got to let him."

"I know!" I say, angrier than I intend. "Ive wanted this more than anything in the last three years, you know? For him to be okay. But now thats happening... I dont know. I think that its too much too fast. What if something happens? I wont be right there to make sure hes okay!"

He takes a deep breath. "Bear, you cant always be right there for him for everything. You both need to be able to do your own things. Youve never even had a chance to do stupid things like most people your age."

"I dont need to do stupid things!" I retort. "Im perfectly fine doing what it is Ive been doing for the last three years. Its kept us alive so far, hasnt it?" Im starting to breathe heavily, starting to feel the blackness of despair. I dont tell Otter that I havent been able to focus all day. I dont tell him that Ive checked my phone every minute for the last four hours. I dont tell him that Ive already called the Herrera household and spoken to Mrs. Herrera, who assures me that everything is going okay. I know that Otter is right: I havent really had a chance to do anything. Ive been so tied up making sure Ty is okay that I never focused on what I want. There have been moments, sure, where Ive felt small waves of resentment, but Ive learned to shove those feelings down before they can amount to anything. But still... now that I finally have a chance to do something on my own (even if its just for one night), why do I wish that everything would just go back to the way it was?

"Bear, hes just staying at a friends house," Otter says, sounding amused and exasperated all at the same time. "I think hell be okay. I *know* youll be okay." I shake my head. Once again, people just dont understand. "I guess," I mutter.

I can hear him grinning through the phone. "So what are you going to do tonight?"

I hadnt thought about this. An entire evening stretches out before me with no obligations, no need for me to worry about the well-being of another. I shudder as I feel loneliness nipping at my heels. "I dont know," I tell Otter morosely. "I guess Ill just go to bed and try to get some sleep."

He snorts in my ear. "I only asked to be polite. I thought it would be rude to tell you to get your ass over here when you get off of work."

"I dont know, Otter. I dont think Id make very good company tonight."

"Bear!" he barks at me, and I wince. "Dont feed me that bullshit!"

"My house is closer to where Ty is at in case he needs something," I say. "It

would make me feel better if I had at least *that*.”

“Fine,” he says. “Then Im coming over to your house.”

“Otter,” I say, about to tell him no. I think that Im just putting up a front because theres a deep dark hunger that has taken over my mind. Its the thought of Ty not being around. Its the thought of me being on my own for once. Its the thought of not having to be quiet or worry about what the Kid is doing in the next room. This yearning roars through me, and I do little to quell it. I feel ashamed and wrong and dirty, but I cant stop it. Unbidden thoughts stroll through my head, and I blush furiously, thankful no one can read my thoughts and see how depraved I am. How horrible I am. How I am acting like such a... whatever.

“Im not taking no for an answer,” he growls in my ear, which does little to squash the monster thats roaring from somewhere inside me. I feel dizzy as I think, *What’s happening to me?*

I’ll give you three guesses, and the first two don’t count, it says sweetly. However, I think we’re past that, don’t you? Why don’t you just do what it is you know you want to do? There’s always room tomorrow for remorse. But until then...

I think incoherently of devils and their silver tongues.

“Okay,” I say meekly.

He exhales in my ear, and it sounds good. “Ill come to your work before you get off and pick up something for dinner,” he tells me happily.

“Youre going to make me dinner?” I say, trying hard not to grin like an idiot. “Again?”

I hear him laugh. “Ill see you in a few hours.”

“Okay.”

“Hey,” he says.

“Hey, yourself.”

“Im proud of you. You know that, right?” he says, and then hes gone.

I roll my eyes and shove my phone back into my pocket. I stretch my arms and think more unthinkable things and have to force myself to stop. I dont think walking around with a hard dick is very conducive to good customer service.

Im about to stand when I see a familiar car pull into the parking lot. I tell my legs to move, knowing its stupid because Ill have to see her no matter what. My legs wont budge. I grip the edges of the table and force myself to rise, knocking my knees against the metal bar that runs underneath. I hiss and sit

back down. Im about to try it again when she gets out of her car and raises her hand to her forehead, blocking out the sun. She looks right at me, and even from where I sit, I can see Anna hesitate.

Its only been a few days since I saw her last, but it feels like forever. I had been so focused on my misery over Ty that I hadnt even thought to look at the schedule to see if shed be working tonight. She walks slowly, as if were both thinking about how she has to walk right by me to get into the store. I tell myself Im being foolish, that we were going to see each other again, that it was only a matter of time. For Gods sake, we *work* together. I stare at her for a moment before lowering my eyes and finding an interesting freckle on my right arm that deserves my undivided attention. I think disjointed thoughts of how when she sees my face, shes going to know everything. Itll take one look, and shell see it written there like I have a big neon sign flashing on my forehead proclaiming that Im a *FAG*, that Ive done *FAG THINGS*, and that Im going to do *FAG THINGS AGAIN*. I groan softly to myself and rub my hands over my face. I think that maybe when I move them, shell have disappeared, either into the store or from the earth. Frankly, I dont know which would be better.

But she doesnt walk right by, and she doesnt vanish into thin air. She sits down on the opposite side of the table. I feel it creak, and I curse ever so softly and move my hands back down to the table. I hazard a glance at her and am encouraged slightly. Shes not sneering at me, and she doesnt recoil when she looks back at me.

“Hey,” she says, appearing almost as nervous as I feel.

“Hey, yourself,” I say back, congratulating myself when my voice comes out normal. “Looks like youre working tonight.” *That sounded real intelligent.*

She nods. “Yeah, Im closing. Did you not see it on the schedule?” I shake my head. “Guess I didnt.”

Anna plays with her fingernail. “So whats going on?”

“Oh, you know...,” I start. In my head, I finish: *Oh, you know, just the usual. I’ve slept in Otter’s bed two or three times now. Oh, don’t worry! We haven’t really done anything. Except tell stories about you. And me. And him. Did you know he’s wanted me for a long time? He really left because he needed me so bad that it hurt, and he thought he was projecting. Remember when I used to say that to you? That you’re projecting? Well, he thought it too. But his was so bad that he used it as an excuse and got the hell out of Dodge, but then he came back, and I still don’t completely understand why yet. Oh, and*

we may have made out. And I may have liked it. And this is after you and I broke up, like... what? Two days ago? Three days ago? After being together since like second grade? So you know, the usual.

"You know," I say again, "the usual."

She nods again. "Is that a good thing or a bad thing?"

I shrug. "Its neither, I guess," I say truthfully. "It just... is."

"Hows Ty?" she asks.

I pick neatly at a slash of paint on the table. "Hes fine. Hes staying the night at a friends house tonight."

Her eyes widen slightly. "Like, a friend from school? Wow, Bear. Howd you get him to do that?"

I snort. "I didnt get him to do anything. He came and asked me."

Concern suddenly blossoms across her face. She knows me too well, and I curse again. "How are you with that?" she asks me softly.

"Me? Oh, Im fine," I say, trying to smile. It comes out like a grimace. "It was bound to happen sooner or later, right?"

She cocks her head slightly. "Im sure it was," she says slowly. "But I wonder why he decided to do it now?" I stupidly almost tell her its because the Kid thinks Im safe and happy now that Otters home. That Im slowly starting to realize that the only reason hes starting to act like the Kid that he is, is because he has someone who promised to take care of me. I dont think itll go over very well, so I tell her I dont know.

She asks about Creed, and I ask about her mom. Both are doing fine. She tells me she got her grades back from school, and she did well. I tell her how I had packed food in the Kids overnight bag. She says that she went to a bonfire on the beach with some of her friends last night. I tell her that sounds like it was fun. She says it was. Neither of us says anything about Otter and neither of us is saying anything about her and me, and when I think I cant feel any more uncomfortable, she glances down at her watch and says she needs to go clock in, or shell be late. I tell her Ill be in in a minute. She stands and looks like she is going to say something else. I look at her expectantly and know Ill answer whatever she says, but she changes her mind and flips her hair and walks inside. She doesnt look back.

FOUR hours later Im sitting in the main office, trying to fill out some paperwork for the produce guys. Its dead tonight, and Ive already sent a cashier home. I had told Anna that she could go if she wanted, too, but she told me she needed the hours. The night manager came on, and I took that as

an opportunity to barricade myself in the office and pretend to be busy. I told myself it was because I *was* busy, that I wasn't trying to hide from anyone, but a part of me felt like a fraud. I'm shoving some papers in a filing cabinet when I hear an easy chuckle behind me.

I turn and see Otter propped against the doorway, as he seems prone to do. He's dressed in jeans and black boots and a tight black shirt under a leather jacket that does little to hide the fact that he's powerful underneath all that unnecessary clothing. I look appreciatively at this and think that straight guys can tell when another guy is attractive, so this can't be *that* gay but most guys don't finish the thoughts with wanting to see just how powerful a body there is without all that clothing.

"What's so funny?" I say as he chuckles again. He grins. "You look hot in an apron."

I rush over, hissing. I push my way past him and peer over his large shoulder, making sure no one heard him. "Don't say stuff like that," I say, glowering at him. "We're at my work!" At least I had kept my dirty thoughts to myself!

He arches his eyebrow. "Why not? You can just tell them that I'm your best friend's gay older brother who's back in town." He flips up the collar on his jacket and pulls an imaginary comb out of his back pocket and starts rubbing it over his head. I glare at him for a moment longer before chuffing in annoyance.

"What are you doing here?" I grumble as he crosses his arms across his chest.

He looks surprised. "I told you I was coming here when you got off. I said I was going to pick up something for din—"

"Otter?" a voice says from behind him.

God hates me.

He turns and sees Anna standing near the doorway. I can't see his reaction, but he doesn't hesitate as he moves forward to pick her up in a hug. She smiles but not before she glances at me over his shoulder. Much is said in this look, but I can't read any of it. I wonder, not for the first time, what Anna knows, or at the very least what she *thinks* she knows. I try not to shudder at the thought.

"How're you?" he asks Anna, and I groan inwardly. *How do you think she is! I want to scream at him. We broke up, like, three days ago because of you! Think for one fucking second!*

She surprises me when she says, "Im fine," and she sounds like she means it. She steals another look at me, and I turn my gaze to the wall, which has suddenly become very interesting. "What are you doing here?" she asks Otter.

He shrugs. "Just thought Id stop by. I was in the neighborhood and wanted to pick up some food. I think Ive eaten everything in the house."

She laughs and I cringe. "Thats cool," she tells him. "Its good to see you, Otter. Im glad you decided to stick around for a while this time. Have you thought about how long youre going to stay?"

He shakes his head. "I hadnt really thought about it." He glances over his shoulder at me. Its a quick look, lasting no more than a second. A blink-and-youll-miss-it kind of thing. "I guess Ill stay as long as Im wanted."

Anna squints up at him ever so subtly. "We always want you around, Otter. Isnt that right, Bear?"

I mumble something to the effect.

"Forgive him," she says to Otter. "Hes been locked up in this office all night, trying to avoid me."

"Im not avoiding you," I bark at her. "Ive had work to do."

She grins sweetly at me. "Sure you have." Otter glances back and forth between the two of us and arches his eyebrow. I try to keep myself from reaching out and pummeling the both of them.

"Do you have plans tonight?" Anna asks Otter. "Maybe we could get coffee or something when I get off of work. You know, catch up for old times sake."

"Rain check?" he asks her. "Ive got some... stuff to do. But definitely sometime soon, though, okay?"

She smiles again and nods. "Of course." She glances at me again. "Bear, arent you off now? Why dont you keep Otter company while he shops?" My hand is on the stapler, and Im getting ready to chuck it at one of them (I dont care who it hits) when she gives Otter another hug and turns and walks away. Otter watches her go for a moment and then turns back to me.

"Bear, put down the stapler before you hurt yourself," he says, eyeing my raised arm.

"A_{NNA} seems... good," Otter says as we carry the groceries up the stairs.

I fumble with my keys as I try to open the door. "I guess so," I grumble back to him. I find the right key and open the door, flipping on the light to the living room. He walks in and sets the bags on the table and then turns to me and takes the bags from my arms and puts them beside his. He then pulls me

into his arms, and I try not to protest too much. I lay my head on his shoulder and sag against him. He puts one hand on my lower back and the other wraps around my shoulders. I feel safe when Im with him like this, but this is something I wont tell him as I can barely say it to myself. It is a foreign feeling to be able to be so conflicted about something, but that discord seems to go away as soon as Im resting comfortably on him. Weve only been doing whatever it is were doing for a few days now, but it doesnt matter. I feel safe.

He pulls back slightly. “Howre you doing?” he asks me.

“Truthfully?” I ask, and he nods. “Its been a very weird day.” “Is this the first time youve seen Anna since you guys broke up?”

I nod and pull away. I sit down wearily at the table. “I think she knows,” I say quietly.

“Knows what?” he asks as he starts to put the groceries away.

I hesitate. I hadnt meant to say this out loud. I hadnt meant to bring this up at all, but the thought has been dancing around my head since I saw her earlier today. I had barricaded myself in the office to avoid her, but not because I thought she could glean anything from my face. I did it because I know Anna can read me better than almost anyone. I hid from her so I wouldnt have to look at her looking at me.

I sigh. “Knows about... this,” I say spreading my arms. “I think she knows about... us.”

He pauses and then pulls a can out and sets in on the counter and turns to face me, crossing his arms. “Why do you think that, Bear?” he asks, his face kind and thoughtful.

I shrug. “Just some things shes said,” I grumble.

“Would it be so bad if she did? If she knew about „this?”

I pound the table with my fist, surprising myself and Otter. “What is *this* ?” I ask him hotly. “What are we even doing, Otter?”

“I dont know, Bear,” he says truthfully. “I keep asking myself that same thing.”

I wince at this. “You do? Do you... do you think its a bad thing?” He chuckles softly and comes down and kneels before me, putting his hands on mine in my lap. “Hey,” he says.

“Hey, yourself,” I say back, unable to look away, waiting for him to answer.

“I dont think this is bad at all,” he says seriously. “I told you that I would take whatever you were willing to give, just as long as at the end of it

all, Im still your friend. Thats always going to be a priority here, and I hope you understand that.”

“I do,” I tell him. “But could you really be okay if we were just friends? You know, after....”

He thinks for a moment and then says, “Bear, I truly think so, yes. Ive told you that, and Im always going to be honest with you, no matter what.” I smile thinly. “Even if its bad?”

He laughs. “Even if its bad. You should always hear the truth from me.”

“Can I tell you a truth?” I ask, taking a deep breath. He nods. “Im scared, Otter. About all... this. What if its not who I am?” I look away. “I dont want to hurt you.”

“Do you think you could?”

“I dont want to,” I whisper, clutching his hands. “Ive just got you back, and I dont want to do anything to drive you away. But I tried something last night and today, and it worries me.”

“And what was that, Bear?”

So I tell him. I tell him how last night Id made sure Ty was asleep and then had turned on the computer and had gone online. I tell him how I had tried looking at... guys and stuff. I started with famous people. Then I went to dating sites and looked at pictures of men. Then it progressed to pictures of porn. Of guys doing things to each other that I had never even thought of. Then I finally struck up the nerve to click on a video and, making sure the sound was down, proceeded to watch the entire thing. Nothing. I was never turned on, even for a moment.

Then today, at work, while on my shift and in between fretting about the Kid and Anna, I had looked at some of the guys that come into the store. There were short ones and tall ones, fat ones and skinny ones, older guys and younger guys, muscles and no muscles. And not a single one of them turned my head. It wasnt until Otter showed up looking like he did that I had even felt something remotely stirring.

While I tell him this, his expression never changes, and I want to hug him for it. He could laugh or snort or look disgusted by me, but he does none of that. He doesnt move until Im finished, and even then he looks thoughtfully up into my eyes, and I feel that longing again, and I wonder if Im broken or defective or something. Im about to say as much to try and crack a joke when he rises up and presses his lips against mine. Im shocked

at first, but close my eyes and bring my hands up and take his head in my hands and rub my fingers through his hair. I sigh into his mouth as it opens, and he probes me with his tongue. I feel his big hands rubbing my legs gently, and then he breaks away from my lips and kisses the line of my jaw until he reaches my neck, where he nips and bites gently. My back arches languorously at the sensation, and I'm about to return the favor when he pulls away.

"Did you feel something then?" he asks.

I nod, eyes wide.

"So what does that mean?" he says as he brushes a hair out of my face. I hesitate before saying quietly, "I don't know."

He sits back on his butt and crosses his long legs in front of him and looks down at his hands, lost in thought. I drink him in while I can. His blond hair is getting longer and falls over his face. He takes a big hand and pushes it back. He takes a deep breath, and I see his chest rise gently through his shirt. The way he's folded up right now makes him look so compact, but I know it's just an illusion. His nose is kind of crooked, like his smile, but it doesn't detract from anything. In fact, it makes him even more appealing. Blond stubble lines his cheeks. I can't see his eyes, but I know what they look like, gold in green. He reaches up and scratches the back of his head, and I can see how strong his arms are, even through the jacket. I try to remember what they feel like around me. I try to imagine them against my bare skin. His hand rubbing slowly on my chest. It would stop at my heart, just to feel it beat, but then it would move on, a finger running softly (but not *too* soft) over my nipples. I would feel the heat of him against me, and the gold-green would shine, and his mouth would fall onto mine, and there would be stars....

With a half-strangled yelp, I leap from my chair and fall on top of him. Quicker than ever (it's like he's always *expecting* me), his arms come up and fold around me. I press my lips against his, and my eyes are open, and his are open, and we gaze upon each other, and he sits up straighter and pulls me closer, and my hands are here, there, everywhere, and I don't want to stop so I rock against him, grinding myself into him. He gasps slightly and fights back with renewed strength. I can feel him underneath me and suddenly there's an ache inside me, an itch just begging to be scratched. It's almost enough to toss all my inhibitions aside. Almost. Breathing heavily, I sit back, his arms resting around my waist, his paws on my ass. He looks at

me through half-lidded eyes, and I cant help but laugh through my panic. He shakes his head to clear the fuzz out and chuckles.

“What was that for?” he asks. He grins up at me appreciatively. I shrug, trying to ignore how hard I am. “Its weird, Otter. I obviously feel something for you, but why is it that nobody else does that to me?” He pulls me forward and kisses my nose. It tickles and burns. “I dont know, Bear. Maybe I shouldnt try and discern why you dont feel something for other guys. It means I get to keep you all to myself.” I groan and punch his arm. “That doesnt help at all.” I look down at him, and he smiles crookedly back at me. His eyes show me how he feels about me, and I want to cower, but I try and push it away. Why is it that he can do this to me? Its not humanly possible for me to be... like *that* for just one person, is it? Thats not how biology works. But then again, Ive never felt this need with anyone before. *It wasn't even this bad with Anna*, I think darkly. Its like hes lit a fire under me and then set me down on the sun. Once again, I think back to what Anna asked me at the end of our fight and wonder if this is what she saw. Shes seen me around Otter enough times, but was it something I did? Ive obviously never acted toward him like this before. How could she see it? And how can nobody else?

“Bear,” Otter says, breaking me out of my reverie. “Youre thinking too hard again. Stop trying to figure everything out all the time.”

I roll my eyes. “I was just thinking about something Anna said,” I say without meaning to. It seems that I cant keep my thoughts from traveling to my mouth for anything.

“What did she say?”

I get off him, move to the counter, and start unpacking the rest of the groceries. Im trying to stall for time, trying to make something up in my head that would sound remotely plausible, but it would be a lie, and I cant lie to him, no matter how hard I try. I may withhold the truth, but I could not look at him and be dishonest. It would seem hes got quite the hold over me, and I blush quietly.

Otter comes up behind me and takes the food out of my hand and sets it back down. I grip the edges of the countertop and try not to sway as a wave of vertigo sweeps me. I know if he asks me, Im going to tell him what she said. Part of me wants him to. Part of me doesnt. Saying things for others to hear has never gotten me anywhere.

“What did she say, Bear?” he asks.

Shit.

My knuckles turn white as I say, “She... she asked if you ever flirted with me.”

“When was this? When you guys were fighting the last time?” There’s no recrimination in his voice like I expected there to be. I think now he knows I didn’t tell him everything.

I hazard a glance at him, and I see his face is kind. This emboldens me slightly. “Yeah. She asked me that and... and something else.” “What else?”

“She asked if—” The words choke in my mouth, and I don’t know if I can speak further. I don’t want to have him freak out or anything. Two guys should never be having this kind of conversation. It should have never come to this.

Then why is it so hard, Bear? that damned voice whispers. If it shouldn’t be like this, then why are you so afraid? Do you think he’ll be grossed out? That he’ll walk out the door again and not come back? That you’ll have gone through all of this for nothing? Maybe he will; maybe he won’t. But if you never ask, if you never say what’s in your heart, then you might as well give up now. You’ll never amount to anything.

I try to listen, but I can’t help it.

“Never mind,” I say forcefully. “It doesn’t matter.” I go to push past him to go anywhere but where I am, but he grabs my arm and stops me in my tracks. I curse him silently and try not to struggle.

“You should know by now that doesn’t fly with me,” he says sternly.

“Whatever it is, you might as well tell me. It’ll make all of this a lot easier.” I sigh, annoyed. “Otter, you don’t have any idea how hard this is for me!

You think that just because I’ve acted this way around you that it’s an easy thing to do.” I blink angrily as tears threaten to rise. “You don’t know what it’s like,” I continue harshly, “questioning everything I’ve ever done. This makes no sense to me! Why am I only wanting you? If I’m supposed to be... *that*, then why doesn’t anything else catch my eye? What the hell does that make me?”

“I wish I could tell you,” he says gruffly. “I wish I had an explanation for you so that we were both satisfied. You only want me that way, great. It should make me feel on top of the fucking world.” He takes a ragged breath. “But it doesn’t. It makes me wonder if I was right all along, that I influenced you somehow. That I *made* you this way.”

I roll my eyes. “I think that’s really fucking retarded.”

He laughs shakily. "I know it is," he tells me. "But whats the alternative? You cant just be... gay for one person, Bear. It just doesnt work that way."

"Im not gay," I say quickly, immediately feeling like an ass. "I never said you were," Otter reassures me. "Youre just you. I could never ask for any more, nor would I expect any less. Besides," he says, chuckling softly to himself, "I hate labels. You dont need to be labeled anything."

I think hard, but just for a moment. "If I tell you what she said, can I ask you something?"

He nods. "Anything. You know that."

I turn to face him, not exactly wanting to, but more afraid *not* to see his face when I speak next. I have to know what he thinks.

"Anna asked me if you ever flirted with me," I say. "I told her no because I never really thought you had. But then she asked me something else, and thats why I think she knows. Thats why she called you after we fought because she saw something in my eyes or heard me say something that sounded untrue."

"Okay," he says, still holding onto my arm.

"She asked me if...." *SAY IT, YOU ASSHOLE!* "She asked me if you were in love with me." It comes out in a rush, and it feels so good to say this to someone else, to get this off my chest. Its only been a few days, and I had tried not to dwell on it too much, but it must have been there more than I thought because I immediately feel a weight lift from me ever so slightly. "I didnt know what to do, so I kind of freaked out and kind of yelled at her. She said I was lying." My breath is coming in hitches now, but I wont stop, I cant stop. "She then asked if I was in love with you, and I panicked, Otter. I panicked. I said no right away, and I dont know what it means because I felt guilty right away, and I wanted to take it back because it sounded so *final*."

I want to look at him, but I cant. Not yet. "I was still so mad at you for leaving and coming back. I was angry because it seemed like that even though you were back, we were still fighting, and I had all this hatred in me. I didnt know how long you were going to stay. I didnt know if I would wake up, and you would be gone again. I didnt know why you couldnt answer me when I asked you about what Anna had said, that you had thought you lost the only happiness you could ever have. I thought it was me. I thought I had

done something wrong to make you walk away like that. But even then, I couldn't stay away. I've never felt this torn or conflicted about anything in my life!

"I keep asking myself what would have happened if you'd never come back. What if Otter had decided not to come back ever again? And that scares me, because I know I would still be where I was. I don't know if that's good or not. It wasn't so bad where I was at. I loved Anna. I *love* Anna. It's just not the same as it used to be, even after these few days, and that upsets me. She's been there for me more than you ever were, but here I am, having this conversation with you instead of her. I'm sad because I have to lie to her. I know she cares about me, but I don't know if she could ever understand this. How could she when I don't?"

I hear Otter grunt, and I know he's about to break, to interrupt me and comfort me in the way that he always does. I shake my head just once in warning, knowing if I don't finish now, I never will. He sighs but doesn't speak.

"I have to lie to Creed. I can't tell him that I've spent the last three days wrapped up in his brother. I can't stand to see him look at me like that. He'll be hurt because he would think that I couldn't come to him with this, and he'll be right. He'll feel cheated out of something. He'll feel like I could never trust him. And then there's the part about this being *you*. You're his brother, and I'm his best friend. I can never do anything that would hurt him."

The words come faster now.

"And then there's the Kid. Did I tell you that he asked if you were gay?"

That's kind of what started the whole fight between me and Anna. We told him the truth, but how can I ever tell him that about me? *I don't even know what I am*. How can I be expected to raise him right when I can't even figure myself out?

"And you. Oh God, it all comes back to *you*. You scare me more than any of the rest. I'm scared that you'll listen to me now and think badly of me. I'm scared that I'll never be able to give you what you want, that you've built up this image of me in your mind that I will never be able to live up to. I'm scared that you'll see this and leave, and I'll be alone again."

I take a deep breath. "But I'm scared most of all that Anna may be right. You told me it was like the fight for me is all you've ever known. I think about that a lot and someplace inside me, some secret place that I can only look at for a little bit at a time, I know you're right. I know this because I've

been fighting for you to come home. Ive been screaming and dying and praying for you to come home, and its taken so long, but now its like you never left, and I cant seem to fit that together in my mind.”

Tell him , it whispers. *You’ve gone this far. What’ve you got to lose? Everything*, I think.

“Ive never told anyone this, but anytime that Ive felt sad or alone or angry or upset, I would pray to God to just make you come back. That I would do anything He wanted me to do if only you would walk through my door. You were the only thing that made me feel safe when the earthquakes threatened to break me. I needed you to come home because when youre not here, I dont have a home. So, thats why I got so mad at Anna, so afraid at what shed said. She had gotten closer to the truth than even I had, and I didnt know what else to do.

“I cant promise you very much, Otter. I want to, but I cant. I can promise to take this one day at a time. I can promise to try and tell you everything. I can promise to try and make you feel the way you make *me* feel. I want you to be safe and protected, and I want to be the one to do it because sometimes, oh God, *sometimes*, the fight for you is all Ive ever known. And Im so very tired of fighting. Im tired, Otter, but if youre here with me I know it could all be okay. I know I can take another step.” I stop, drained, exonerated, terrified.

I take a chance and look at Otter. I dont see horror or pity like Id feared. No. What I see is a fierce pride, a wild-eyed look that takes my breath away. He moves quickly and picks me up, and before I can protest hes carrying me down the hall to my room. I have time to think how strange it is that I fit so perfectly right where I am. He sets me gently down on my bed and steps back and takes off his jacket and flings it to the ground and pounces on top of me. His mouth smothers me, and I open my eyes, and all I can see is him and me, and we are all thats left in the world. His hunger spills over, and I press back, opening his mouth with my tongue and groaning lightly. Im tired of waiting and wondering, so I reach for the bottom of his shirt and pull it above his head. He struggles to take it off, and we both hear it rip, but we dont stop, we dont care, we just keep pushing on. My shirt is gone, vanished as if by magic. He lies down on top of me and attacks my mouth again, and I smell burning because wires are shorting out in my brain again. His skin is warm against mine, and then its hot, and then its blazing. I gasp as he lowers his head from my mouth and drags his tongue down my chest and flicks it wickedly against

my nipples. I rock my head back, gripping the edges of the blanket.

Then he performs another trick, and suddenly my pants are gone and any clothing that was underneath them is gone. I fumble for his belt buckle, and I hear someone whispering, "*I need you, I need you,*" and I don't know which one of us it is, but it doesn't matter. His pants slide off, and his cock springs free, and before I can do anything, he stretches his entire body against me. I think the friction will be enough to make me crazy. There are so many things I want to do, but I don't know how. I reach for him, but he grabs my arms and holds them over my head and says, "No, Bear, no. Now is for you. This is only about you," and I nod, and his mouth lowers again, past my chest, and my hands go to his hair as he kisses my stomach, my side, my hip bone.

Then my dick is in his mouth, and *it feels like this? Oh God, how could I not know it could ever feel like this?* I babble incoherent nothings and push myself further down his throat. My eyes roll back into my head, and I count the stars that are shooting past, and there's one, and there's two, and then there's an entire sky filled with stars, and it gets so very bright. I arch my back again and say, "Otter, oh my Otter," and then he rises and kisses me again sweetly, beautifully, painfully. His breath is ragged in my mouth, and my breath is the same back, but that's okay because it's just him and me, Bear and Otter, and at this moment, I don't care what anyone thinks, what anyone knows. I don't care what has happened in the past or what could happen in the future. The only thing I care about is feeling his heart beat against mine, and I think how funny it is that they're beating in time with each other and how it seems that we're one person and one mind and one everything.

But I want to go further, I want to crawl inside of him and stay there forever, and I say as much, or as close to that as my mind allows. He nods, sweat dripping from his brow onto my chest. He licks it off and then pulls me up and over him and lays on his back and says something about his pocket, *it's in his pocket*. I reach down and find a tube of something (*when did he get this?*), something I don't know because my mind is fried and unable to form any kind of comprehension. It feels cold against me when he rubs it on, and I feel slick and boiling, and my skin is alive and rumbling, and he is alive beneath me, and I put my hands on either side of his head as he raises his big legs up closer to his chest. I feel him grab a hold of me and guide me, and I gaze at him, and he smiles back at me, that same crooked smile, and I know this is Otter. This is Otter, and he's home. He leans up and kisses me gently, and I find his tongue, and then tightness suddenly envelopes my dick, and it's

warm and weird and wonderful, and I press gently because I don't want to hurt him, but he growls at me, a low, *hungry* growl, and I push until my hips are against him. He moans, and I put my forehead against his because the fight for him is all I've ever known, whether I've always known it or not, and then he pushes back, and I rock against him, and he rocks against me, and my eyes squeeze closed, and as he says my name over and over and over again in my ear, all I can see are the stars again, and every single one is gold, and every single one is green, because every single one is the color of his eyes.

SOMETIME later (okay I won't lie. It's not that much later; I didn't last very long), I'm lying on top of him, my head propped up on my hands near his chest. He's pushed up against the wall behind my bed, his hand once again in my hair. I'm trying hard not to think about what I just did, what that makes me, and for the most part I succeed. It helps that he is staring at me, his eyes filled with wonder. I can't help grinning like an idiot, and my face burns, and I bury it against him, and he laughs softly. It's starting to get cold in the room, but he's radiating against me, and I sigh, seemingly content for the first time in a long time.

"So... that was good," he says, amused.

"Yeah?" I say, sounding like a child hoping for praise.

"Yeah," he says, and I smile against him. There's white noise in the back of my head that I'll have to deal with sooner or later, but for now it's staying quiet. For now, it's letting me have this moment.

"So what does *this* mean?" I ask him. And then I lick him, a quick dart of my tongue.

He laughs again, a great rumbling sound I feel crawling out of him. "Bear," he says chidingly, "it means whatever you want it to mean. We can write our own rules now. It doesn't have to be something that already exists. We are whatever you want us to be."

I think for a moment. *Whatever I want us to be? I don't even know what I want me to be.* The noise in my head grows a little louder.

"What do you want us to be?" I ask him, trying to ignore the sudden unease I feel.

"I want for us to be happy," he says softly. "And to do that, you need to be happy. With this. With me." He smirks. "I can't force you to do that, as much as I'd like to. I can hear the gears turning in your head from here."

I slap him playfully, trying to make light of it, but it gives me pause. *Now there are two people who can read me like a book,* I muse. "I don't know," I

tell him with a straight face. “We may have to do this quite a bit more before I am completely happy.”

He rolls his eyes and pulls me up his chest, and I dizzily enjoy the short friction-filled ride up his body. He kisses me gently and then lays me on his shoulder, a place I’m already starting to think of as my spot. This is mine. “Well do it until you’re 100 percent satisfied,” he whispers in my ear, sending chills running down my body like ice flowing within me. He hums happily as he feels me shiver.

We’re quiet for a while, just him and me, each lost in our own thoughts. The noise in the back of my mind seems to have stopped its rise, and I touch it gingerly, testing the waters. It doesn’t ripple as much as I thought it would, but still I don’t submerge myself into it. I don’t need to. Like the ocean, it has waves, and the tide is still low, but it laps dangerously at my feet. I close my eyes and glare angrily at it, wishing what stretched before me was a desert. I imagine a wind blowing sweetly through my hair, but with it comes disjointed voices, saying things like *what are you doing?* and *is this who you really are?* and *oh God, Bear, oh my God*. I try to ignore them and focus on the heat I feel beneath me, but the wind has brought seeds and while they still haven’t sprouted, they’ve started to take root. I grimace bitterly against them, angry at myself for doubting this, for doubting *him*. *He’s the only thing I’ve got!* I shout at the sea. *Don’t you think about taking this away from me!* I start to feel better as the ocean recedes, but then a voice calls out: *It won’t be us that drives you away, Bear. Pretty soon you’ll want to come for a swim, but it won’t be us that makes you.*

“Hey,” he says, breaking me from my insanity. I look up at him, trying to mask my face so he won’t see any of my thoughts. He kisses my forehead and says, “You get to ask me something now.”

“Huh?” I say, unsure of what he is speaking of.

“You said that if you told me what Anna said that I had to tell you something. What do you want to know?”

Oh. That. I lie back down in the crook of his neck and inhale briefly. He smells like Otter, and it’s the best thing I’ve ever known. I feel him chuckle as my breath tickles him as I exhale. *Go ahead*, the ocean says. *Go ahead and ask him. Maybe he’ll save you from drowning.*

I think I’ll ignore it, that I will tell him that I’ll ask him something later. When I open my mouth to speak, of course, what I really wanted to say falls out. It’s my curse.

“What did you and Jonah talk about when he called?” I whisper into his neck, and I feel him tense.

“You heard that, huh? I thought you had,” he says, his voice even.

I push off of him, needing to see his face. When I do, its smiling weakly at me, and his hand brushes my hair again. “I didnt mean to,” I say quickly. “I just... shit. I dont know. I—I wanted to make sure you were okay. I saw the expression on your face when you answered the phone and....” I trail off, unsure of how to continue.

His grin widens, and it almost looks normal again. “You wanted to make sure I was okay? Im a big boy, Bear. I know how to handle those things.”

I scowl at him, not really meaning it. “I could tell you the same thing about *me*. That doesnt stop you from doing it anyways.”

Otter shakes his head. “I know, I know.” He shrugs. “I cant help it, though.”

“Then let me worry about you,” I tell him seriously. “Stop thinking Im the only one who can break here.”

He snorts. “Yes, sir. Ill keep that in mind.”

“So,” I say, raising my eyebrows, “are you going to tell me or what?”

He sighs, ever briefly. “That was the first time Ive talked to him since I left,” he says. “Hes called a few times and left a couple of messages, but Ive never called him back. Its not really fair, I guess, but I didnt know what to say to him. Hes—he *was*—a big part of my life. You cant just wipe somebody completely away and think it wont have repercussions.”

“Kind of like how we couldnt do that to each other?” I ask, trying to keep the hopefulness out of my voice.

He shakes his head, and I grow cold. “Its not like that at all, Bear. You have to *want* to be rid of something like that to be able to do that. I never wanted to brush you away. Not fully. I told myself I did, and God knows I tried, but it didnt happen.

“And Im not saying thats what I want to do to him; I dont. Im not saying that I want to be with him or anything, but when you share as much with a person as weve shared, it almost becomes impossible.”

I keep a straight face, but inside theres a storm brewing over the ocean. Thunder rumbles, and its distant, but the winds are blowing again, and I fear its bringing the storm inland.

“I think I did love him in a certain way,” he says softly, staring off as if remembering some happy memory. “I think I did as best as I could. But when he called, it was almost like talking to a stranger. I couldnt think of what to

say, how to act. Then he starts asking me when Im coming home, how much longer Ill be here. He tells me he thought I just needed a little time away, to work through whatever it is I need to work through. And I felt a little sad then, Bear. I say this not to hurt you but because I want to be honest. I felt a little sad because I knew that I would never consider him my home again. It was like a door had shut and was locked, and I dont have the key to open it.” He sighs again and rubs my cheek. “I didnt know how to tell him this, so... I didnt. I told him that I didnt want to talk anymore and that I would call him soon.” He looks away again. “I dont know what Id say if I did,” he mutters, more to himself than to me.

“What do you want to say to him?” I say slowly, the water warm as it washes around my ankles. Im starting to wade out, but I cant stop. The wind picks up and whips briefly through my hair. “What would you say if you could say anything?”

“Honestly?” he asks, and I nod, trying to keep the storm from my eyes. “I would thank him,” he says. “I would thank him for what he has given me over the past couple of years. I would tell him I want nothing more than for him to be happy, like he made me happy. I would tell him that I wish that I could have given him everything he gave me.” He rubs his eyes with his big hand. I kiss his chest and an irrational thought bowls through me, telling me to bite him, to mark him as my own. Ive never met the man we are speaking about, but I hate him. I hate that hes been able to share in a part of Otters life that I never will. I hate him because I drove Otter to him. I hate him because he doesnt sound like somebody who *should* be hated.

“But,” Otter says, “the main thing I would want to tell him is that he shouldnt wait for me anymore. That looking back, I feel like I was just biding my time. That sounds harsh, I know”—(I actually think it sounds perfectly fine)—“but its the truth. He gave me a lot, but it would have never been enough.” He looks thoughtful as he gazes back down at me. “It would never have been enough,” he tells me, “because it would never have been you.”

“Are you sure that I can be?” I ask hoarsely. “Are you sure I can be enough for you?”

He captures my face in his hands, and once again theres only him in the world. His eyes flash, and at least for now, I feel the storm recede. The waters dry and the clouds dissipate, and I think its because of him.

“Whether I knew it completely or not,” he tells me, “you were the one I compared everything to. You will always be enough because its you Ive

always wanted. I still dont think that any of this is real, that Ill wake up, and Ill be in San Diego, and it will be back where it was. Where we havent spoken in years, and all I have of you is a picture, and all you have of me is a letter.” His voice becomes soft and thick. “If that happens, if I wake up and none of this is true, I will be on the next flight here to make sure it all becomes real. I will find you. You have to believe me when I say that, Papa Bear.”

“Why, though, Otter? Why do you think that?” I ask him, suddenly needing to be sure, needing him to say it. I know its there, lurking on his lips, and even if I cant say it back, I need to hear him say it, to give me the assurance my heart is aching for. “Ive never done anything to deserve you,” I say, sniffing. “I chased you away, and you still came back.”

He grins, and its the Otter grin. “Why? Why do I think that? Why did I come crawling back, practically begging for forgiveness? I thought you were smarter than that. I thought you knew.”

“Say it!” I cry at him.

He leans in and kisses me, long and deep. I press back, hard and blind. When he pulls away, its only slightly, and his lips are still touching mine. I feel them move when he speaks.

“Oh, Bear. Its always been you. It will always be you. I love you, and thats why it will always be enough.”

8. Where Bear Stares into the Sun

I^{KNOW}you're probably wondering if I said anything back to him. I didn't, but before you get all angry and are all, like, *Oh my God, Bear, but he was so sweet and cute and vulnerable*, just know that I have my reasons. The clouds might have been gone, and the ocean might have gone back to wherever it came from, but I knew they were still there, somewhere. Trying to reconcile with this complete change that I've been going through has been more taxing than I'd first thought. For days now, I've wanted nothing more than to sleep either in my bed alone or with him. Even when it's with him, I'm usually asleep as soon as I hit the pillow. My body is lethargic and my thoughts muddled, but it's not so very bad. Hearing him say what he said has brought new understanding to who I am and who I want to be. If someone can care about me that deeply, despite all my faults, despite all my refutations, despite all my *everythings*, then that makes all the storms and all the oceans worth it. I just hope that I can remember this. It's a thought I fall asleep to, and it's there when I wake. It's my mantra, and I repeat it so I know that I know he is real.

But do I love him? I don't know. Don't get me wrong: I've always loved Otter, but not in the way that we're talking about now. If I do *love*- love him (God, how lame does that sound?), it's in a way that I've never done before. I think often about how I felt about Anna. I try to compare the feelings, but it's just not possible. There are so many differences between the two (aside from the fact that one has a penis) that it's like I can never feel the same for Anna as I do for Otter. But I know I could never feel for Otter what Anna and I had. I think back to what Ty said, on that day that we went to Portland to pick up Creed. It's only been weeks, but it seems like years. He said that he thought it was like your stomach was on fire, but in a good way. He said it's like you could not go on another day without the person. I had told him I thought it was when all the stupid love songs on the radio started making sense. The only reason I think we're both right is because his makes sense, but I found myself singing along to a Celine Dion song on the radio.

And I got it.

So what does it all mean? I wish I knew. I still can't seem to shake the dark senseless jealousy I felt when he was talking about Jonah. I know Otter

is here with me now, and he says he's not going anywhere, but I can't help

feeling like his past is not as over as I'd like it to be. He said it perfectly when he said you can't just wipe away your history like that, and whether I like it or not, Jonah is a part of Otter. Maybe not a current part but there nonetheless. Otter hasn't given me a reason to doubt him since we started whatever it is we were doing. I try to concentrate on that. Sometimes, though, I feel the waves lapping at my feet and hear the rumble of a storm, just off in the distance. It never comes closer, but it's always there. I am strangely exhilarated by this whole thing. It feels dangerous and secret and wrong but oh so good. It's like doing something bad but knowing you won't get caught. It's like winning for no reason but to win.

It's like swimming in the ocean with lightning flashing overhead. Ty survived his overnight with flying colors, much to my bemusement. Otter and I picked him up the next day, and Mrs. Herrera told me he was a perfect gentleman, welcome back at their house anytime. She told me that she and her husband were taking Alex on a camping trip as soon as school was out and wanted to invite Ty along. I told her I would think about it. What I was really thinking was that there was no way in hell I would let anyone take him out of town. Both the Kid and Otter chided me the entire way home as my thoughts were evidently splayed across my face, a disdained scowl that I was sure I had smothered.

"Am I really being that unreasonable?" I complained to Otter that night on the phone after Ty had gone to bed. "I think I'm doing pretty good here." He laughed into the phone. "I think you both need to take baby steps," he told me. "I'm sure that this is just as hard on him as it is on you."

I wish I could have believed him, but the Kid seemed to be taking leaps and bounds. In those few short days following his foray into normalcy, Ty seemed to realize everything he had been missing. He wasn't clinging like he used to and kept hounding me to let him go on this damn camping trip. I told him that we would see when it got closer, and he would grin happily and then bring it up again an hour later. It's selfish of me to not just say yes, I know, but I can't help but feel that we are being pulled in opposite directions, him with his burgeoning freedom and me with my newfound appreciation for anything and everything Otter. I wonder often now if most parents go through this, watching their charges discover what life has to offer and not being able to stop it. I'm not his dad, but I'm the closest thing he's got so I think my feelings are justified; at least, this is what I tell myself when I lay awake after all have fallen asleep. He and I both know all too well that this world has

teeth and will attack when it seems the most docile.

So there we went: Ty finding himself for the first time in three years, me finding myself for the first time in my life. Those few days we had left before Creed came home were the best and worst of my life. I relished in having Otter all to myself and not having to answer questions. I cringed as I saw Ty skip off to school into throngs of waiting friends. I groaned as Otter found this one place on the inside of my thigh that made me forget my name. I sighed as I got to work and saw that Anna did not come in until after I had left. I worried as Creeds return got closer and closer and nothing would be the same unless I was willing to admit to something that I had been fighting since that night. Over these past days Ive had shuddering orgasms, deep stretches of cavernous despair, and lengths of peace like Ive never known. Experiencing so much so fast is enough to drive a person over the edge.

“So what time will you be back?” I ask Creed now as I watch Otter and Ty play chess at our house. Otter has told me that hes pretty good, but from what I have seen, the vegetarian ecoterrorist-in-training is apparently also Bobby Fischer in disguise. I dont know how he learned; Ive never picked up a chess piece in my life. I watch as he breaks a five-minute stretch of silence by moving a castle thing up a square thing, and Otter groans.

“Probably early,” Creed says in my ear. “I want to get back and never look at vodka ever again. Its the devils drink.”

“What are you doing right now?”

“Shots of vodka. Did you know they make raspberry-flavored?”

I snort.

“Anyways,” he says, “I promise not to go anywhere until I have to go back to school. We can hang out all you want.”

“Great,” I say, trying to keep the waver out of my voice. “That sounds... great.”

Creed laughs. “Why do I get the feeling that you dont mean that? Whats been going on since Ive been gone?”

“Nothing,” I tell him. “Same old, same old. You know how Seafare is.”

“Uh-huh,” he says. “Seriously, Papa Bear. You okay?”

“Im fine,” I say, sweat glistening on my brow. “Never better.”

“If you say so.” He pauses for a moment and then says, “Is Otter there?”

“Uh, yeah. Did you want to talk to him? Hes currently losing to a nineyear-old at chess.” Otter shoots me an evil look.

“Nah,” Creed says. “Ill see him tomorrow.”

“Cool. Have fun with your vodka.”

“Hey,” he says.

“Hey, yourself,” I say back.

He hesitates, and I don't want to know what's going through his head. “Never mind. We can talk when I get back. Later, dude.” He sounds funny. I sweat some more.

“Bye,” I say, making up my mind to tell him everything, but then he's gone.

I look down at my watch as I set down my phone. “Ty, it's time for bed.”

He sighs and pushes back from the table. “That's fine. Otter was getting decimated. I was going to win in the next four moves.”

“I was not getting decimated,” Otter says indignantly. Ty reaches up to the chess set and shows him the next four moves. Otter rolls his eyes. “Is there anything you're not good at?” he asks the Kid.

Ty shrugs. “Not that I've seen. I'm sure there's *something*.”

I laugh quietly as Otter scowls down at the table. I'm about to tell the Kid to get his butt in gear when his face scrunches up like it was before he made a move, like it does when he's thinking heavy things. I groan inwardly, not really up to answering Ty's questions about why people believe aliens make crop circles when it's obviously bored farmers or how to solve world hunger the vegan way. I shake my head and wait. Otter looks at him and then back at me and then sits back in his chair. He knows.

“Derrick?” the Kid finally says.

“Yes, Ty?” I say.

“Can I ask you a question?”

I can't help but smile. “You always do,” I say, teasing him.

“You have to promise not to get mad,” he tells me, which is a first. The Kid has never prefaced any question like that before. Thoughts run through my head, trying to pick out every possible scenario in which he thinks I would be angry with him. Nothing comes to mind, and I have no choice but to promise. He says nothing for a while, as if gauging the truthfulness of my words. He glances casually at Otter and then back at me, and right when he opens his mouth and before he speaks, I know what's going to come out, what he's going to say, and I only have seconds to choose whether to lie or to be honest to one of the only people who thinks what I say matters.

“Is Otter your boyfriend?” he asks.

“What?” I say, stalling for time. Otter suddenly sits up very straight in his chair. His eyes go wide, and he cocks his head at the Kid, as if trying to

figure out if hed really heard what Ty had just said. “What?”

“Is Otter your boyfriend?” the Kid repeats.

The blood rushes from my face as I say, “Why do you ask that?” The guilt I feel at not being able to answer his question right then is easily outweighed by the mounting sense of horror I feel. But all of that is eclipsed by the word *boyfriend*. Ive never even thought of it like that. Is that what Otter is to me? My... *boyfriend*? Sure, Otter is someone I care about (*Care about?* the voice asks. *Oh, Bear*), but Id never really put that association with what we have. I dont even know what we have. Sure he does things to me that make my head spin, and I sing along with Celine Dion, but that doesnt make him my... make me his... you know. I look to Otter for help, but hes still staring at the Kid, his mouth now hanging open on its hinge.

“Its just something Ive been thinking about the last few days,” Ty said. “I didnt know if I should ask, but then I figured its always better to ask something than to just wonder.” He unscrunches his face and smiles cautiously at me. “Is that okay?”

I dont know what to say.

I should reassure him that of course its okay to ask questions. I should tell him that he can always come to me when he has something on his mind. All these words and more form in my mind but derail and die on their way to my mouth. I think absurdly for a moment about how he hadnt asked me if I was gay like when hed asked if Otter was. Hed not seen to label me in that regard but to ask, in his own way, if Otter was mine and I was his. This races and dances around my skull, and I think again on how I wished Id thought of what Otter was to me.

Then why can't you answer him? it asks. Why are you sitting there silent like it's all going to go away if you ignore it? It you're so strangely excited at the thought of him belonging to you, then why can't you answer the fucking question? Hes nine years old! He's nine years old and has the guts to ask the things that you can never bring yourself to think of in the first place.

“Its okay,” I tell the Kid quietly, and he looks instantly relieved. He hazards a glance back at Otter, who has now focused his attention on me, a look of wonder and naked adoration upon his face. If only he could see how very close the storm has gotten.

“Ty,” Otter says, tearing his gaze from me to concentrate on the Kid. “Bear and I havent really... talked about what we are. This is something that is very new for the both of us.”

“Is that why he and Anna broke up?” the Kid asks him.

Otter shakes his head. “It wasn’t just that. There was a lot of grown-up stuff going on between them, stuff that had nothing to do with you or me. Sometimes that happens to people.”

“I know that,” the Kid says smartly. “Some people are just not meant to be together. But that doesn’t mean you still can’t love them.”

Otter laughs shakily. “That’s true. And Bear and Anna love each other very much, and we love you very much.” He grins quietly. “But hell, Kid. You caught me off guard with that one.”

The Kid looks down at his hands. “Does that mean you love Bear too?”

“Yes,” Otter says without hesitation. “It means I love Bear.”

“So then he’s your boyfriend.”

“Ty, he told you we haven’t talked about that yet,” I say, harsher than I mean to. “This is something for me and Otter to figure out.”

Ty doesn’t catch on and doesn’t let it drop. “But, Bear,” he tells me, “If Otter loves you and you love him, then why don’t you call him your boyfriend?”

His eyes narrow. “You do love Otter, don’t you?”

“I- I- I-,” I say, finding out how great I am at stuttering.

Otter comes to my rescue yet again: “Like I said, Kid: we’re still trying to figure things out. This is all very new for Papa Bear, and we’ve got to let him think things through for himself.”

Ty shakes his head and looks at Otter sadly. “I hope you know,” he tells him, “that just because he can’t say it, doesn’t mean he doesn’t feel it. He’s always been like that and whatever he needs to work out, I hope that you can let him.” I want to rush over to the Kid and scoop him in my arms. I want to bury him in everything I can give because he keeps finding ways to show me he knows me better than I know myself.

“I do know,” Otter says, patting Ty’s hands. “And I haven’t forgotten my promise to you. But I think *you* know that.”

Ty nods and gets up from the table and walks around to Otter and lays his head on his shoulder. Otter wraps his big arms around him and pulls him in tight and kisses his head. From where I stand, I can hear the Kid whispering to Otter. He says, “Thank you for taking care of Bear. He’s needed it for a very long time.” He lets go of Otter and turns to face me, walking slowly in my direction.

“I don’t care who you are,” he tells me, his voice clear and strong. “I don’t care if you love differently than everyone else. It doesn’t matter because you’re still

my brother.” He takes my hand, and I stare down at this little Kid, this person who is wiser than I could ever hope to be. I squeeze his hand hard, and he squeezes mine back, and I know he knows all I cant say. He beckons me down with a finger, and I lean forward, and he whispers in my ear: “Im glad Otter came back. Im glad you were able to find him again. But if its okay with you, Im still going to like girls.” With that, he leaves the kitchen, humming quietly to himself.

I think Ive told you how he is one of the few people in the world that can leave me speechless. But have you ever had all your synapses fire at once and your mind is a literal blank slate? Its not as if you cant speak, because generally, in synaptic-firing situations, a billion things run through your head, and you just cant pick which one to say. Im talking about having no singular thought, no retort, rebuttal, negation, nothing that goes through your mind. Its almost blissful not having anything to say.

Just pure white bliss.

“Youokay?” Otter asks me. Hes just come back from saying good night to the Kid and has found me in the same place Ive been standing since Ty started asking his questions. I havent been able to move and am still in the process of trying to jump-start my brain into functioning again. All I can do is nod.

Otter smiles at me and steps in front of me, rubbing my arms at my side. “One of these days I am going to figure out how the hell the Kid got so smart,” he tells me, laughter in his voice. “He doesnt miss a single thing.”

“Let me know when you figure it out,” I say weakly, finally finding my voice. My brain is sluggish, but it has turned over and finally starts to catch. Im able to take a deep breath, but the reboot has left me unable to process anything.

“I dont think well ever know,” Otter says, kissing my forehead. “But I guess thats okay too. Hes going to be one of those people that says one thing and will instantly have a million followers.” He laughs again. “I know Im already one of them.”

I roll my eyes. “What? Like the Gospel According To The Kid? Hell be able to tell you whatever it is you never knew you were thinking about?” Otter arches his eyebrow. “You never thought about it?” he chides. “Any of it?”

I scowl at him. “Stop it. You know what I mean. How the hell did he pick up on any of this? Weve been careful, for Christs sake.” My eyes narrow as I

glare up at him. “Did *you* tell him anything?”

“Oh, come on,” he scoffs. “Do you really think I would do something like that?”

“No,” I say grudgingly. “But it cant be that blatantly obvious, can it? Hes just really fucking perceptive or something.”

Otter snorts. “Does it really matter if its obvious or not?” he asks me. “The Kid was completely fine with it. As a matter of fact, hes ecstatic over it. Who cares how he figured it out?”

I take a step back from Otter and shove my hands in my pocket. “*I* care,” I tell him crossly. “If a nine-year-old can see this, what the hell are we going to do about everyone else?” The white bliss, the feeling of the slate wiped clean, is gone. In its place, the ocean has filled in through the cracks of the seabed, and the wind is whipping around me, and I feel like I am standing at the edge of something, and I cannot for the life of me take a step back. How I could go from feeling empty to this in such a short space of time is beyond me, but I did, and I cant make it go away. “Your brother,” I hiss at Otter, “my best friend, comes home tomorrow. What the fuck are we going to do about that?” I remember vaguely talking to Creed on the phone just a short while ago (or was it longer than that? Days? Months? *Years*?) and how Id been ready to tell him everything.

“Whatever we choose to do,” Otter says, sounding annoyed. “If you dont want to say anything to him, then thats fine. But he *is* my brother, and he *is* your best friend, and I would think that would give him somewhat of a right to know. What do you think would happen if he found out? That he would never speak to you again?”

I shake my head angrily. “I dont know what would happen, and I dont want to find out. You told me,” I say, pointing a finger at him, “that you would give me some time to work this out. You know I dont know what the hell Im doing. You know this is the fucking scariest thing Ive ever done.”

His face softens, and he closes the distance between us and takes my hand. I want to shake it off, but his big paw has a firm grip on me, and it would be futile. I stare irritably at the ground, wanting to go back to the state of nothingness. Lightning flashes and thunder rumbles, and I wonder what would happen if there was ever an earthquake at the edge of this ocean. I wonder if the shocks alone would be enough to swallow me whole. I think incoherently of tidal waves.

“I know,” Otter says gently. “Im sorry if it seems like Im trying to force you

to do anything, because thats the last thing Id want to do. Well do this your way. I promise.”

“Im sorry,” I whisper, and then hes around me, and I rest comfortably in my place on his shoulder. Hes big, so much bigger than me, and I hope that its enough to harbor me against whatever may come. He rubs my back, and the waters retreat just out of sight. I can still hear the subtle cacophony of the waves, but its drowned out by the haven that has amassed itself around me.

“I know, Papa Bear,” Otter says from somewhere above me, his words muffled by my hair. “You just got to trust me sometimes, okay? I know its hard to believe, but every now and then, I do know what Im talking about.”

“I do trust you,” I sigh. “Its myself that Im having a hard time with.”

He pulls back and takes my face in his hands and kisses me sweetly. He grins crookedly at me, and his eyes once again show everything hes feeling about me, every emotion bare on his face. The waters come a little closer but do not return to where they were. He brushes my cheek and chuckles.

“Whats so funny?” I ask.

“Well, aside from Ty knowing about us, we did find out something else thats interesting.”

“Whats that?” I ask, puzzled.

He arches an eyebrow. “That you love me.”

My mouth drops open. “I totally do not!” I growl as I punch his shoulder as hard as I can. He breaks out into gales of laughter and tries to get away, but I jump on his back, wrapping my arms around his neck, and he stumbles into the living room. I squeeze my knees into his sides and beat on his chest with both hands. He cackles, and I know Im nothing more than a pesky fly to him when hes able to reach back with one hand and pull me off his back and over his shoulder and onto the couch. I land on my side, and he falls on top of me, grinning his grin and the gold-green glinting, and he leans forward and whispers in my ear, “I totally dont love you too, Papa Bear,” and then his mouth is on mine, and for a moment, that blissful feeling is back, but this time its accompanied by something else, something that feels strangely like the sun.

“So BEFORE we get there, we need to talk about a couple of things,” I tell

the Kid, trying to keep the nervousness I feel out of my voice. “Just so we

have an understanding.”

He rolls down the car window and holds his hand outside, letting the breeze play across his fingers. His newly cut hair flips and flops across his head, and he looks at me expectantly. “Is it about you and Otter?” he asks plainly.

I nod. “I just want to make sure you know what we spoke about last night. About...” I grip the steering wheel tightly. “About how Otter is... hes...” “Your boyfriend?”

I sigh. This already isn't going well, but it's my fault. “How'd you know?” I ask him curiously, staring straight ahead.

I feel him shrug. “I just... I don't know. I guess I picked it up after you and Anna broke up, and he was around a lot more. You guys weren't really friends again before that happened.”

“That's it?” I ask incredulously.

He shakes his head. “No, it wasn't just that. I knew Otter was gay, and I knew that he loved you because he would look at you like he did. It's how Anna looked at you.” I cringe, cursing God for giving the Kid the power to observe more than the rest of us combined. “And then I saw a few days ago how you looked back at Otter the same way,” he says, pulling his arm back inside. He crosses his arms across his chest and looks over at me accusingly. “How come you don't tell Otter you love him?” the Kid asks. “Is it really so hard to say what you feel?”

“It's not as easy as you're making it out to be,” I say through gritted teeth. He rolls his eyes. “Well, it's certainly not as hard as *you're* making it,” he retorts. “I would think that if you find someone who loves you as much as he does that you would do anything to make sure that they know you feel the same way. At least, that's how *I* would want it to be.”

“Nothing is that black and white, Ty!” I say, letting my exasperation get through. I want to believe him that all of this is as simple as he says it is. But no matter how smart and wise he is, I have to keep reminding myself that he is still just a kid. A very grown-up kid, but the Kid nonetheless. “Things can't be a certain way all the time just because you want them to be!”

“Why not? Why do people care so much who you love? You're not hurting anyone, right?”

“Not that I know of,” I say, trying to keep the thoughts of Anna out of my mind.

“And you're not doing anything wrong?”

“No, Ty.”

He throws his hands up in the air. “Then who *cares*? Ill never understand why people just wont let others be who they are. Its not like its affecting them in any way.” He turns and frowns at me. “And until you realize that,” he says quietly, “how can you be fair to Otter?”

“Its not just about being fair to Otter,” I retort, unsuccessful at keeping my anger in check. “If it was, things would be a lot easier than they are. I have so many other things to worry about, Kid.” Traffic slows to a stop in front of me, and I glance over at Ty. “Ive never even thought about anything like this before, much less imagined myself doing it. This changes everything about me, and its going to take a long time for me to be able to deal with all of it. On top of that, I have to think about everything else that was going on before. Just because Otter is here and all this is happening doesnt mean my life gets to stop completely so I can focus on him. I still have responsibilities. My job, our house. You. I cant let this be the only thing I zero in on.”

Ty grimaces at me. “Dont try to put me in the middle of this. Im doing fine, thank you very much.” He stares out the window again. “Better than Ive been doing in a long time,” he mutters. “Papa Bear, you have to have your own life too. If you cant do that now, then when?”

Its the same old argument that Ive heard a thousand times before from what seems like a thousand different people. *When are you going to do something for yourself, Bear?* they say. *When are you going to put yourself in front of everyone else?* But Ive never heard it from the Kid before, and its not sitting right. Ive always counted on Ty to tell me the truth whether I wanted to hear it or not. Hes always been the one to say things that would resonate with me. Thats why it makes this a whole hell of a lot harder. I want to tell him to shut the fuck up and mind his own goddamn business. I want to tell him that everything I do and everything Ive ever done has been for him. That Ive spent the last three years making sure that he knows that at the end of the day, no matter if everyone else in the world has rejected him, that he still has me. To hear him... *turn* on me like this is akin to a betrayal that Ive never felt before. *Maybe you’re so upset because he is the only one who tells you the truth*, the voice whispers. *You’ve always been able to trust him to say the things that no one else would dare to mention to you. And that’s why it burns so badly, isn’t it? It burns and it blisters because if he’s saying it, if he’s singing that same old song, then everyone else would be right. And that’s why you’re really mad, Bear. That’s why you want him to... how did you so eloquently put it?*

Ah, yes: shut the fuck up. You want him to shut the fuck up because if he says it, you know in that secret place that it's true. But the question you need to be asking yourself, that real question that nobody seems to be asking, is why one and all seem to be so keen to push you right at Otter? Why are they all so eager to see you happy? What have you done to deserve this?

I've done everything! I shout back. *I've done everything I can!*

It rumbles its mirth throughout my head. *Then... what's the problem?*

"Bear?" Ty asks. "Are you okay?"

I wince as the voice in my head laughs again. "Im fine," I grumble at him. "Can we turn this off of me for a second and turn back to what I was trying to tell you?"

He exhales noisily. "Fine. Only if you promise to at least think about what I said."

"Well see, Ty. But for now, I need you to promise me to keep what you know to yourself. Theres no need to be going around talking about it, okay?"

"You mean to Creed, dont you?" he says almost inaudibly.

I nod. "Yes. Thats exactly who I mean. Were going to be there in, like, two minutes, and I need you to promise me that youll let me figure this one out on my own. You need to keep your mouth shut about this for now."

"Why dont you just tell him?" the Kid asks. "If hes really your friend he wont —"

"Ty!" I almost shout. Its the closest Ive gotten to yelling at him in the longest time, and I dont miss the way he shrinks away from me. I feel bad, but I cant help it. The storm is near, and the waves are crashing, and we are *pulling onto their fucking street*, and I need to have this validation. I need to know that this can stay a secret at least until I figure out what to do. I think back and see me wanting to tell Creed everything when I spoke to him last night. I dont recognize that person. That person is crazy, that person is insane, that person is *wrong*. It cant happen now, and if I cant get this promise from him I am going to keep driving past their house and go home and close the door and curl up under my covers and wait until everything in the whole goddamn world starts to make a fucking modicum of sense.

"Youve always told me to tell the truth, no matter what," he says, and I instantly hate my fortune-cookie advice. "So if Im going to do this for you, you have to promise *me* something."

"Anything!" I say, panicking as their house comes into view.

He takes a deep breath and says, "You have to promise to not let Otter go."

You have to promise not to drive him away. Im scared of what will happen to you if you do.”

“I promise I can try,” I say meekly.

“Then I can promise to try as well,” he says, trapping me neatly.

I almost drive past anyway.

“A_{BOUT} time you got here!” Creed shouts as me and the Kid walk through the door. “I was about to go out and hunt you two down.” He hugs me fiercely, and I see Ty over his shoulder but he wont look at me. I know hes angry at me, but this is the only thing I could think of to do.

“Sorry,” I say, forcing a smile on my face as he lets me go. “I didnt know I needed to show up when *you* wanted me to.”

He snorts. “You do what I say, when I say, Bear. You know that.” He turns to the Kid. “And hows my favorite little man in all the world?” He picks him up and sets him on his hip. “Why are you being all quiet?” he asks him suspiciously. “Is Papa Bear beating you? Do I need to take him down a few pegs?”

This makes the Kid giggle, and I feel myself relax. Ty wraps one arm around his neck and kisses Creed on the cheek. “Hey, Uncle Creed,” he says.

“Hey, yourself,” Creed says back. “Thats better. I thought we were going to have a problem here or something.” He carries the Kid toward the kitchen, and I hear him ask Ty about his sleepover, and Ty instantly launches into full detail, and I can do nothing but follow. I walk past the pictures, and I know they are all pointing and laughing at me again. *Ha ha*, they say. *Ha ha on you!* I walk faster.

Otters in the kitchen, and he grabs the Kid from Creed and spins him around, and Ty does his usual false protestations. Otter brings him up, and Tys head goes to his ear, and I can see his mouth moving as he whispers something, something so soft that Creed and I cannot hear what he is saying. The Kid pulls back, a serious look on his face, mirroring the one that has appeared on Otters. Otter nods his head, and Ty wiggles down from his arms and grabs Creeds hand. “Can I show you something I found on the Internet at school, Uncle Creed?” he says, pulling Creed toward the stairs.

Creed grins back at me, and as they turn the corner, I can hear him say, “If you show me porn, Im complaining to the school board on Monday.”

I stare after them as they disappear. I know what the Kid is doing, and I curse him silently in my head. Part of me wants to know what he said to Otter, but the other part wants to follow after them and not worry about it at all. Before

I can move, Otter is standing next to me. He reaches out tentatively and touches my fingers. I sigh and link my pinkie with his, and he smiles.

"Hey," he says.

"Hey, yourself," I say back.

"You okay?" he asks, concern in his voice.

"Whatd the Kid say to you?"

"You didnt answer my question."

I roll my eyes. "You didnt answer mine."

He grabs onto my hand, gripping it gently. "I asked first," he says, grinning. It doesnt quite reach his eyes.

"Im fine," I say, dropping his hand and rubbing my arms.

He arches his eyebrow. "You looked spooked, Bear."

I glare at him. "There are a lot of things going on right now, Otter. I dont know if its such a good idea that were here."

He snorts. "So... what? Youre going to ignore Creed for the rest of your life?" He takes a step closer and as my back is against a wall, I cant move.

"Youre going to ignore me for the rest of your life?"

I put my hands up to push him away, and they fall on his chest, his big, hard, overgrown chest, and he brings his hands up to cover mine, and all I want to do is be sheltered by him. I want to crawl up against him and have him dig around inside my head and make all the bad things go away. Its funny, really. I can feel doubt and anger and trepidation all I want, but the moment I am in his presence, the moment I can touch and see and hear and smell and taste him, all that is driven away. Not all the way away, but far enough. I dont know what that says about him. I dont know what that says about me. He gazes down at me, waiting for an answer.

I shrug. "I dont know, Otter," I whisper. "This is going to be harder than I thought."

His brow furrows subtly. "What? Creed?"

I nod.

He brings up my hands and kisses them gently. "Just say the word, and Ill worry about Creed," he tells me. "Until then, I promise to be good." He grins. "But youre going to owe me," he says, kissing my hands again. "Just because Creed is here doesnt mean theres going to be a dry spell for the next couple of months. If I need to, Ill knock him out and stuff him in my trunk until Ive had my way with you eight or nine times."

He finally gets me, and I laugh. He smiles at me and leans down to kiss me

on the lips, and I close my eyes in anticipation and have a chance to think, *Maybe it will work out okay*, and then I hear Creed and the Kid thumping down the stairs. I hiss and move quickly to the other side of the kitchen, hiding my growing erection behind the counter of the island. Otter smirks at me and shakes his head, and I can see that shadow cross his face again, ever brief but there nonetheless. I know somehow I'm causing it, but I don't know what to do. I open my mouth to say something, *anything*, to make the situation just a little bit better, but Creed walks in, the Kid upon his back. He sets him down on the counter and then looks at me.

"Well?" he asks, his face suddenly serious.

"Well, what?" I say, trying to shrug nonchalantly. It comes out as a seizure, and I hit myself in the ear.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Creed growls, his eyes flashing.

The ocean rises, and the storm crashes, and the white noise in the back of my head rushes forward. I look at Ty, whose eyes are wide. He shakes his head behind Creed's back, trying to tell me he didn't say anything to Creed while they were upstairs. Otter's staring stupidly at Creed, his mouth open.

"Tell you what?" I say, my voice wavering.

He walks and stands in front of me, his face a few inches from my own. He props his hands at his side, cocks his head to the left, and squints his eyes. I know he's found out, and I know he's trying to figure out how in God's name I ended up fucking his brother. He knows, and he's going to freak out and kick my ass, and Otter will let him because it'll be what I deserve. I try to think of as many rebuttals as I can, but nothing comes to mind. Roaring panic is never a great place to be in when trying to think of quick lies.

"About you and Anna!" he says to me. "I had to hear it from her?"

"Me and... who? Me and Anna?" I say, still trying to think of a lie. One half of my brain still has not caught up with the other, and I don't get what he's saying.

"You guys broke up!" Creed exclaims, punching me on the shoulder. "How the hell could you not tell me that? I knew something was wrong with you when I spoke to you last night!"

"Uh, yeah," I say, believing in God 100 percent. "Yeah, we did."

"I called her this morning when I got back," he says, pushing past me to open the fridge. He pulls out beers (*I thought you didn't want to drink anymore!* I think wildly) and hands one to me and Otter and cracks his open. "She told me you guys broke up last weekend," he continues, propping himself against

the counter. "She didnt really say why, though. She sounded really funny about it."

I nod and drink three-quarters of the beer down in a single pull.

"Well?" he barks at me.

"Well, what?" I say, drooling the ale down my chin.

"Bear! What the fuck happened!"

"Oh. Oh, uh, it ended."

He rolls his eyes and smacks me upside the head. "Are you broken tonight or something?" he scowls at me. "I know it *ended*, Bear, but thank you for refreshing that fact. I want to know *why*."

I steal a glance at Otter and Ty for help, but they are staring everywhere but at me. I sigh and look back to Creed. I take another drink. "It... wasnt working out?" I hazard.

He gives me a hard gaze. "Bear, youre going to have to do better than that. I go away for two weeks and come back and everything is in disarray!" He holds up his hand and starts counting off. "You and Anna are broken up. The Kid is spending the night at friends houses. Otter has done a complete one-eighty over *something*. I swear to Christ its like the whole goddamn world is ass-backwards, and I dont know what the hell is going on!"

I shrug again. "It just wasnt the same anymore," I tell him slowly. "She and I werent... meshing very well. As for the Kid, hes trying something different, I guess. And Otter... Otter must... be in a good mood?" This last part comes out as a squeak, and I see Otter cover his mouth and try to conceal his laughter. I remind myself to kill him later.

Creed takes another drink and leans in and whispers (though loud enough for all to hear), "I think Otters back together with Josh or Jason. He wont tell me, though, the fag."

"His name is Jonah," I say flatly, without meaning to.

Creed appears startled. "Well, Jonah, then." He throws a dishrag at Otters head and says, "Hes not saying a goddamn thing to me about it, though. It sounds like you know more about it. Remind me to ask you later."

"I told you Im not back with Jonah," Otter retorts, throwing the rag back at Creed, who sidesteps it and lets it fall onto the countertop.

"Well, youre obviously getting something from somewhere," Creed says. "Youve practically been skipping around the house since I got home. I shudder to think what kind of faggy orgies have been going on around here since Ive been gone." He turns to me and peers at me curiously. "Have you

seen any men in ass-less chaps in my absence?" he asks me.

"Nope," I say. "No chaps."

"Thats good. Id hate to walk in on—"

"You shouldnt talk like that," the Kid interrupts, his voice cold. "Thats not a very nice thing to say at all, Uncle Creed."

Creeds eyes go wide, as do mine and Otters. I can only speak for myself, but I think theyd all agree that weve never heard the Kid sound like this before. He eyes are narrow and his arms are crossed, and hes shooting daggers toward Creed.

"Uh—say what, Kid?" Creed asks him.

"Dont say fag," Ty growls at him. "Thats a mean thing to say to anyone. You wouldnt like it if I called you that, so I dont like it when you call Otter that."

Creed looks strangely at the Kid and then back at me and then to Otter and then to the Kid again. He nods slowly. "Youre absolutely right, Tyson," he says quietly. "I was just joking around, but I promise to not say that around you again."

"Dont say that around *anyone*," Ty admonishes.

Creed raises his hands, surrendering. "Okay, okay: I wont say it around anyone ever again. Geez, Kid. Youve got a stare down that would scare Jesus."

The Kid continues to glare at Creed, and I motion to Otter to take him out of here before he launches himself at Creed and takes him out. Otter nods and lifts the Kid off the counter and into his arms. The Kid rests his head against his shoulder, and Otter kisses his head and whispers something into his ear, and from here, I can see him smiling. They leave the kitchen, and its not until we hear the TV turn on (CNN again) that Creed turns to me, his face ashen and his eyes wide.

"Okay," he says, his voice shaky. "What the fuck was that all about? How the hell does he know about Otter?"

"You werent exactly being subtle," I note.

Creed throws his hands up in the air. "So my lack of disclosure makes a third grader able to figure out my brothers sexual proclivities? And how the hell did this get turned back on me, anyways? I was supposed to be chewing *you* out, not getting my ass handed to me."

"Hes not a normal kid," I say, reminding myself for the billionth time.

Creed takes another swig of his beer and sets it down. "I know that," he tells me. "And weve got no one to blame for that but ourselves." He shakes his

head. "But that still doesn't answer the question, Bear. Come on, spill."

I shrug. "He asked Anna and me last week if Otter was gay. I didn't see the point in lying to him about it." I know, I know. That's not exactly what happened. If Anna hadn't been there, we'd probably still be sitting on the couch, him repeating my question, me with my mouth hanging open. Whatever. "He's proven over and over again that he's more than capable of handling things that would make most of us run in the other direction," I tell Creed. "What's the point of ignoring it if he would find out one day as it is?"

Careful, Bear, it whispers. You're almost to that critical hypocritical stage. But at least you've moved past anger and denial, though, right? Oh, the steps are just so much fun! I think acceptance is right around the corner! Gay pride, here we come! It's raining men at the YMCA! HALLELUJAH!

I look away from Creed.

"So the Kid knows, then?" Creed says in awe. "Well, that changes a lot. Now I'm *really* going to have to watch what I say. You don't think..." He pauses and looks down at his beer, knocking it back and forth between his hands.

"Think what?" I ask curiously.

He hesitates, then says, "You don't think Otter... gets offended by what I say?" He begins to speak faster. "I mean, I don't care who Otter sleeps with. I don't care that he's a fa—gay. I don't care that he's gay. Why would I?" He grins thinly. "He's my brother. You don't turn away from someone like him just because he likes dick instead of the good stuff."

I chuckle. "You certainly haven't lost your way with words."

"Bear, I'm serious!" he exclaims. "Does Otter really think I'm some gay-bashing homophobe? I thought he knew I was always joking!"

I roll my eyes at him. "He doesn't think that at all, you moron. Otter would have beaten you down years ago if he had thought that at all." I grin and take another drink of my beer. "He thinks we should even tell you about—" I freeze, the words dying in my throat. My tongue becomes stuck to the roof of my mouth, and I feel my stomach roil. Once again, my lips forgot to tell my brain that it was not supposed to move without prior authorization. *Oh my GOD! my mind shrieks. Red alert! Red alert! Batten down the hatches and SHUT YOUR GODDAMN MOUTH!* I grip the beer bottle so hard that I'm afraid it's going to shatter in my hands. I think I should and cause a distraction, because Creed is staring at me intriguingly, waiting for me to finish.

"Tell me what?" he asks.

ABOUT US! the voice bellows. HE THINKS WE SHOULD TELL YOU ABOUT US! CREED! CAN YOU HEAR ME? BEAR IS FUCKING YOUR BROTHER! YOU STUPID IDIOT, HE'S FUCKING YOUR BROTHER!

“Bear?”

I try to smile at him, but I know its a grimace stretched across my face. Once again, a blinding moment of panic has burrowed itself into me, and I cant think of a single thing to say. The little voice inside my head continues to scream, begging, threatening, *pleading* for me to tell the truth. It gains control of me for a split second, and my mouth opens to do just that when I snap it shut, retaining brief dominance over myself. *It could all be over!* it howls angrily. *It could all be over if you just grew a pair! How bad do you think it could be if he's standing there, practically on his knees over worry about what Otter thinks! This isn't a man who will hate you! Well, he'll be shocked,* it concedes, *but he'll get over it! Just say what's in that secret place you've kept under lock and key. Oh please, Bear. Don't keep it in the shadows anymore!* I open my mouth again, not sure what is going to spill out, when Im saved (cursed? foiled?) when Otter walks back into the kitchen.

Creed jumps at the opportunity. “So you *have* been keeping secrets from me!” he admonishes his brother.

Otter looks startled. “Uh, what? Secrets about what?” He looks at me, and I want to frantically wave my arms, but I cant move. I cant breathe.

Creed glances back at me victoriously then turns back toward Otter. “Bear said that you guys decided to tell me something. I was feeling all bad and shit for calling you a fag—er, gay, sorry—and Bear said you guys wanted to tell me something.”

“He did?” Otter says, unable to keep the surprise out of his voice. He looks to me again, and I try to show him inside of me, to see the storm that is brewing on the edge of the ocean. I try to speak, to scream, to make any kind of noise to show my dissent, but Im frozen in my spot and for the life of me I cannot move. *Get it over with*, it whispers, as I shove it back down. *Get it over with before it's too late.* And then its gone, the voice silenced and locked away within my depths.

“Bear?” Otter asks me. “Are you sure?”

Three little words. *Are... you... sure.* Three words that Ive heard put together before in my life (words that I myself have used) but never before have they sounded so ominous, so full of change. As I look between Otter and Creed, all I can think about is how I wish it was fall and Creed was back in Arizona

and wed never had this conversation. I wish that Creed had decided to stay an extra day in Portland. I wish... God, how I wish so many things. But do you want to know what I really wish? I wish I could look at my best friend and my... *boyfriend*... and tell them both what they want to hear. The secret place locked inside me cracks, and the chains it is bound in shake, and the rust flakes off and for a moment—one shining, breathtaking moment—I think it will explode, sending its splinters ricocheting throughout me. But the bonds are strong, the secret place fortified. It cracks, yes, and it shakes, oh yes, but Ive been a good craftsman and it holds.

It holds.

“I said that we decided to tell him about how Ty found out you were gay,” I say smoothly, hating the slickness of my voice, ignoring the flash of annoyance I see cross Otters eyes. I turn to Creed. “Ty heard you and Otter talking one time we were over here about how Otter was fighting with his... boyfriend.” (*Oh, Bear*, it whispers.) “He said he wasnt trying to eavesdrop or anything, but what can you do?” I shrug. “Kids will be kids.”

Creed looks back and forth between me and Otter suspiciously. Im about to go on spitting more half-truths when he laughs. “So it kind of was me,” Creed says, knocking back the rest of his beer. “Well, shit, Bear: Im sorry. I didnt mean to have to give the Kid the idea like that.” He looks back at Otter. “Maybe hes right,” he says. “Maybe I do need to watch what I say.”

“Its okay,” I say. I take a quick look at Otter and see disappointment play across his face, skulking, mocking me. I beg him silently to look up at me, to understand where Im coming from, to remember his promise of a short while ago to take this at my speed. He sighs, and his shoulders slump, and he finally looks at me, and even though there is that promise between us, it does nothing to cushion the hurt I see in his eyes. I want to rush across the room and take him in my arms and whisper apologies, to utter that old cliché of how *it’s not you, it’s me*, but that wont do. Thats apparently not who I am. He walks to the fridge and grabs a bottle of water and walks past me, and for a moment, time slows down. Its one of those moments where it feels like youre the only two people left in the world. Everything seems to eek along, and the place around you dissolves into nothingness, and its a gasp in time thats supposed to make you feel more connected to someone than anyone ever before. Now try having one of those moments when time slows, and the person walks by, and your eyes meet, but its not the slow beating of your heart that catches your breath but the shadow that youve seen crossing that

persons face a few times before, a shadow that you know you've caused and that you know you could do something about if only you had the guts to do it. If only....

"Wait," I breathe, reaching out and catching his arm.

Creed, there's something I've been meaning to tell you. You see, a lot has gone on since you left. A lot has gone on for years, actually. I'm the reason that Otter left. Whether he agrees with me or not, I'm the reason he left, and I'm the reason he stayed away. Something happened between me and your brother, Creed, and it happened right after my mom left. I was scared and I was sad, and he came to my house the night before he left, and I did something that I shouldn't have. I kissed him. I kissed your brother. But that's not what I did wrong. What was wrong about it was that I let it affect me so much that he left. I could have stopped him. I could have stopped the last three years if I had really wanted to. And don't get me wrong; part of me did want to stop him. But everything else was crumbling around me, and I didn't know what else to do. I know that I can't keep using that as an excuse, no matter how hard I try.

But something funny happened, Creed. Otter came back. Otter came back and something in me shifted, something in me broke free. For the first time in a long time, I saw myself through somebody else's eyes. It was blinding because it was like looking into the sun. I've never had anyone look at me that way before. Something in me changed, and I've been struggling with it since. It's an uphill battle every day, and I don't see the end in sight, and that terrifies me. But if you want to know the truth, I want you to know. I love him. I love Otter. I think I always have, and I think I always will. It sounds weird, I know, coming from me. I'm the last person you'd expect to hear say something like this. I just don't want to keep it in anymore. I'm tired of fighting it, and Otter told me the fight for me was all he's ever known, and I couldn't do that to him anymore. Not when he finally came home to me. Not when I could make this easier on the both of us. I am in love with your brother, Creed, and it's all going to be okay. Nothing will change between you and me because of this. You're still my best friend, you're still my brother. Can you see that? Please tell me you can....

"What, Bear?" Otter asks me quietly, waiting. Creed looks over at us curiously. The words can spill out, I know they can. I know they can.

"Nothing," I mutter, dropping his arm. Otter looks at me for a moment longer, his eyes filled with sadness. He then shrugs subtly and walks out of

the room. I watch him go. It feels like forever that Im watching him go.
“So the Kid knows?” Creed says, completely oblivious to the crashing of the world. “Like I said, Im sorry, dude. I dont know what I was thinking.”
“Im sorry too,” I whisper softly.

9. Where Bear and the Kid Plot and Plan (And Write Bad Poems)

“W_{HAT}am I going to do?” I groan into my hands. “Its like I can see myself being open and honest about everything, but I dont recognize that person. And Im afraid that if I cant do it, Otter is going to get frustrated and leave. How the hell did I get myself into this position?”

I sit on the couch at my house a couple of days later, after the fiasco that was Creeds homecoming. Ive been kicking myself for the last forty-eight hours, replaying the look on Otters face over and over again until I cant bear to see it again. So of course, right when I think Im over it, he pops back into my head, his eyes showing what no words can convey. The guilt has been eating me from the inside out. I cant sleep. I cant eat. I cant function on a normal day-to-day level like I should be able to. The last two days have gone by in a fog of Otter-ness, and unless I get some kind of reprieve, Im going to go insane. I havent seen him since I took Ty home that night. Weve talked on the phone, but Ive had to work late the last couple of days, and Ive gotten no chance to grovel at his feet for forgiveness. Trust me, its not been lost on me how I sound. Ive never acted this way before, not even with Anna. With her, if I ever did something stupid, and she was upset with me, I always knew that she would get over it. I just needed to give her her space, and eventually she would call me, whether it be the next day or a week later. Thats how we functioned. But now with Otter, only two days have gone by, and theres been one short conversation where nothing of consequence was said, and Im ready to crawl up the fucking walls. I sound so lame.

The face that belongs to the ear Im bending sits back in his chair, his little legs dangling off the edge, not quite reaching the ground. Ty puts his hand under his chin and rubs his jaw thoughtfully. I can see hes thinking, devising something, and I cant help but feel a small sliver of hope rise through me. Thats immediately killed by the thought of how Im waiting for my nine-year-old little brother to solve the crisis of my newfound sexuality and my... *boyfriend*, who apparently Im pining for like Im twelve. Hey, at least I *know* Im pathetic.

“So weve determined that youre not ready to tell people yet,” the Kid

says matter-of-factly. “And we dont know when youre going to be ready, right?”

I nod.

“And we know that Otter promised you that he would do this on your terms (however unfair *that* is), and that he would respect your decision not to tell anyone about you two, right?”

I nod again, ignoring the commentary.

“So you think Otter is mad at you because you had the opportunity to say something, and you didnt. And youre mad at Otter because you feel like hes pushing you toward that something even though he promised you not to. But at the same time, youre respectful of the position youve put him in because he hasnt had to hide who he is and who hes with in years, and you can see its straining him.”

I nod, loving the Kid more than I could ever tell him.

“So now you need to find a way to make Otter happy again, and at the same time, make you happy and also make sure its a happiness that will last until you are ready to admit the truth to people who probably will only be mad because youve kept it from them for so long. And with this, you also want to find out what it would *take* for you to be ready to tell people about you, but you need to grasp why you are so freaked out about it in the first place, because eventually, you do want people to know about you and Otter, but only for the simple reason that you want Otter and yourself to be able to go about your lives without having to worry about what secrets you keep and who knows them.” He stops and takes a deep breath. “Does that about cover it?”

I nod weakly.

The Kid sighs. “Bear, its pretty obvious.”

I startle. “It is?”

He shakes his head. “I cant believe that youve been stewing over this for the past two days and havent come to the conclusion yet. Ive listened to you for the last twenty minutes and even *I* know what you need to do.”

“What!” I almost shout. “Tell me what I need to do!”

“You want Otter to be with you, right?”

I grimace, but agree.

“And you want him to be happy?”

“Right.”

“And you want to be able to do something for him that will let him know

how you feel about him?”

“Yes!” I say, practically panting.

“And if I tell you what it is you need to do, youre not going to question it but do what I say because deep down youll know I am right!”

“I swear to God, Ty!”

The Kid looks me squarely in the eye. “You need to tell him that you love him. Youve never told him that before. You need to have him stand in front of you, and you need to tell him how much you love him and that you dont know what youd do without him.”

“Well, I dont know about that,” I say, hedging.

“Bear!” the wannabe ecoterrorist shouts at me. “You just swore. To *God*. You cant tell a little kid that you swear to God over something and then not do it. You may effectively ruin my childhood.” He looks off into nothing, a wistful expression on his face. “Gosh, think of the therapy bills. Not to mention how Ill probably never be able to have a normal relationship when Im an adult. Ill live with you forever and become a cat lady.”

I cock an eyebrow at him. “You hate cats.”

He rolls his eyes. “Well, yeah, *now* I do. But I wont have a choice. Itll be inevitable. And Ill probably have to throw birthday parties for my feline companions where I bake them cakes out of Fancy Feast. All because you went back on your God swear.”

My hands feel sweaty as I rub them together. “Ty,” I say, “I cant just have him come over and say „Hey, Thanks for coming. Can I take your coat? Oh, by the way, I love you, so please dont be mad at me anymore.” I shake my head. “That sounds retarded.”

“Well, duh,” the Kid says, sounding like a kid. “Youve got to do something special for him. My Lord, Bear, dont you know anything about romance? Youve had a girlfriend *and* a boyfriend; you think you would have learned *something*.”

“I know romance,” I retort. “I can be... like *that* if I wanted to.”

The Kid sits back in his chair, his *MEAT ISN'T NEAT* shirt riding up on his side. “Okay, then,” he says as he makes a face, “if youre such a passionate person, then why dont you tell me what you think you should do?” He folds his hands on his stomach and smirks at me.

“Fine,” I say vehemently. “Ill tell you what Ill do. Im going to.... Okay, wait a minute. Okay, no, thats lame. I could—wait, no, I think thats illegal in this state. I could... make... him something?” I finish, looking up at the Kid, who

waves his hand, motioning for me to go on. "I could... make him dinner? And... there could be... candles?" He nods, waving his hand again. "And, we could... do... something else? Jesus, Ty, I'm not some kind of machine! I can't think of something right on the spot."

He shakes his head. "Bear, you're so lucky you have me," he says seriously. "I know," I reassure him.

He leans back in his chair, and I am amused at his lordly mien as he presides over the future of my so-called love life. He doesn't speak right away, and it gives me a moment to mull over the position I'm finding myself in now. If someone had told me a few years ago that I would be sitting on the floor of this apartment waiting for the Kid to figure out the greatest way for me to tell my best friend's brother that I love him, I would have thought that person had a hardcore crack addiction. There's a nervous jitter running through me, an anticipatory buzz at what the Kid and I are planning. *Am I really going to tell Otter that I love him?* I think. *Is that even going to fix anything?* I notice with trace amusement that I never question the fact of whether I do love him or not. *Well, at least that's settled,* I think wryly.

Ty's eyes light up, and he sits up straight in the chair and claps his hands together. "I know what to do!" he exclaims. "Bear, you are going to owe me so bad after this!"

"What!" I say, excited and terrified all at the same time.

"Okay, so you said that you wanted to make Otter dinner, right?"

"Right."

"And we both know you're surprisingly not bad in the kitchen, right?"

"Uh, thanks. But right."

He ignores this and moves on. "So here's what you're going to do...."

T_{ys} idea was brilliant. It was the stuff of cheesy romantic over-the-top

Hollywood movies. I swear to God the Kid is going to conquer the world when he grows up. Okay, scratch that; he'll probably take over in the next five years. Like I said, though, the idea was amazing, but the execution... well, the execution isn't going so well.

Goddammit.

Okay, so before I let you see me make the biggest fool of myself, let me fill you in on the setup.

Ty suggested that we go for broke on this one. It was his philosophy that if you're going to do something like tell your boyfriend that you love him for the first time that you should go big or go home. I told him about how Otter had said it to me for the first time, and it wasn't anything elaborate. He had me tell the story of a few days ago when I had practically begged Otter to say it. When I finished, the Kid said it sounded big to him, and then he snickered to himself. I told the Kid he doesn't make any sense. Ty told me to shut up and listen to him because I didn't know what I was talking about. I told him to act his age. He told me to act mine. I decided to shut up and listen to him. Now I think he was just being dirty.

Ty's idea was still to have me make dinner for Otter, but he said that while making dinner in and of itself is nice, it's not good enough. Ty said that we needed to do this on the beach, in front of the ocean, and under the stars. He wanted to get a table and set it up in the sand and cover it with a white tablecloth and have us dress up in our nicest clothes (he kind of looked at me in disdain when he said this part and then proceeded to ask if I even owned any nice clothes) and have candles and music, and while he was talking, I tried to picture all of this in my head and couldn't imagine myself doing anything like that, and what the hell were we thinking, and I was just going to pick up the phone and tell Otter right now. I told the Kid as much and had gotten as far as to pick up my phone and was about to press in Otter's number when Ty grabbed the phone out of my hand and threatened to tell Otter that I liked to be spanked during sex.

This proceeded to lead us on a long tangent where I had to have him explain to me how he knows about stuff like people getting spanked during sex. He said he might have heard it mentioned while watching MSNBC. I told him he was grounded from watching the news channels for a week. That's where this whole sidebar should have ended, but then I was forced to explain S & M and bondage to my little brother, who was persistent on the topic, and who then kept staring at me with mounting horror when I finally *did* explain, and I realized I had maybe gone too far, and we had to spend the next five minutes with me swearing to God that I had never nor would I ever attempt to do anything like that. He might now be the only nine-year-old who has heard the terms "cock ring" and "fisting." My parenting skills are unparalleled.

When finally he would look me in the eyes again, I knew the only way I could earn his trust back (no matter what he says, I *know* the Kid thinks I like

getting whipped now) was to go through with his plan. I wondered out loud how we should get Otter to dress up in nice clothes and come to the beach without giving him some kind of idea as to what was going on. The Kid said he would call Otter and tell him when and where to be. I tried to weasel out of it halfheartedly again by saying what if someone saw us and wouldn't that kind of defeat the purpose of keeping this on the down-low? The Kid countered with the fact that we both knew of a small stretch of beach that nobody ever went to. What about the Kid? Where would he go while I was doing all of this? It seems that was the perfect time for him to ask me if he could go on that damn camping trip with Alex and his family on Wednesday, after school got out. I saw how neatly the Kid had played this game, and I would have been pissed off if it hadn't been so *smooth*.

Wednesday. Has a day ever sounded so ominous? Wed-nes-day. I told the Kid I thought Wednesday was Latin for Satan, and that we probably shouldn't do it then because it might be bad luck. The Kid then proceeded to tell me what the word Wednesday actually means and where it came from (apparently it's Middle English for *Wednes dei*, the day of the English God *Woden*—how the hell he knows these things, I'll never know). He then said to stop being such a girl. This struck him as funny, and he laughed as he asked me if I was the girl in my relationship with Otter. I scowled and threw a pillow at his head.

So the Kid called Otter and told him where to be and what to wear. I tried to listen in on the conversation, but Ty shot me annoyed glares and eventually locked himself in the bathroom and turned on the sink and the shower and kept repeatedly flushing the toilet to drown out his whispering. I banged on the door and yelled that Al Gore would kick his ass for wasting all that water. He came out five minutes later and told me that first, Al Gore stopped being relevant four years ago, and that second, he hadn't given anything away to Otter. But he did tell me that there was a new stipulation and that we both couldn't wear shoes. I arched an eyebrow at this, and he said that it wasn't meant to be more romantic this way but more practical. He said that Otter had tried to find out what he was up to, but the Kid made him promise not to ask any further questions to either him or me. Otter promised.

We reviewed everything that I had in my closet, and Ty was getting more and more discouraged as we went further and further into the racks of clothes. He had finally pulled out the last thing in the closet, and our room was completely trashed, and he sat on the ground, shaking his head, asking

why did I not even own some kind of suit? I told him I wasn't pretentious enough. He said I didn't know what that word even meant. I told him what it meant. He grumbled for a few minutes, and then his eyes grew wide, and he jumped up from the crater of clothing he had created and ran down the hall, and I heard him go into Mom's old room. This surprised me, because he never goes in there for anything. I got up and followed him, and he had opened the closet door in her old bedroom. I wondered what he reached for because our mom had taken the majority of her clothing with her, and even if she hadn't, I wasn't going to wear anything of *hers*. I opened my mouth to tell the Kid that yes, I might be about to tell a guy that I love him, but that didn't mean I needed to do it in a bad thrift-store dress and heels. Before I could speak, he let out a crow of triumph and stopped back out of the closet, holding a tuxedo that was fashionable twenty years ago. I'd forgotten it was in there. It belonged to Ty's dad and had been left here along with some other things when he and our mom had stopped doing whatever it was they'd been doing. My mom had said she didn't have the heart to throw it away and thought that maybe Ty could wear it on his wedding day. I remember looking at my mom with a strange sort of respect. Of course, that was immediately killed when she continued by saying she wanted Ty to wear it on his wedding day as a reminder to never be a fucking bastard bitch whore like his father was.

Ty unzipped the bag the tux was in, and it smelled slightly stale, but Ty said that Febreze would kill any odor. I told him I wasn't wearing that. He told me to shut up and try it on. I did, and when I stepped in front of the mirror, the suit fitting surprisingly perfect (is there any other way for this fairy tale to go?). I was shocked to see how good my reflection looked staring back at me. We had forgone the bow tie because it was plaid (at least Ty had forgone the bow tie because it was plaid; I thought it looked very retro) and the matching cummerbund was left off, as well. What we had was a black tux with a white shirt that Ty made me tuck in. I started doing bad James Bond impressions in the mirror, and Ty said that if I did that on the beach with Otter that I was going to be alone forever. I stopped. When I looked to the Kid to see if he approved, he smiled and said I was almost presentable. We Febreezed the hell out of it.

The next few days were spent in alternate states of panic and preparation. Otter called me a bajillion times and asked me what the Kid and I were planning and then made me swear not to tell Ty that he had broken his promise. I told Otter I didn't know what he was talking about. He called me a

liar. I called him a jerk. He asked to come over, but I told him no, I was busy. I really *was* busy getting ready for all of this, but I also didnt want to see him until this whole thing was going to happen. I didnt want to ruin the surprise, knowing really that I just didnt want to throw up on him when he showed up at my apartment. Otter called an hour later, sounding suspicious, and demanded again to know why Ty told him to wear a tux but no shoes and go to the beach at eight oclock the following evening. I told him once again I had no idea what he meant. He growled into the phone, and it was low and breathy and that ended up being the first time Ive ever had phone sex. Messy, messy business, that.

Ty approved the menu (everything cold, making it easier to make and bring to the beach) and the haircut (I tried to get out of that one, but he told Sam, the same guy who had been cutting my hair since I was a baby, to cut it as short as possible but still have hair; when he was done, I was shorn and horrified, and the Kid was smirking and satisfied). He approved the table (a large black card table from the furniture store), the tablecloth (white), and the candles (long and tapered; I wanted scented ones but he said those are for when people eat meat and have to poop—I didnt bother to explain that I do both). He approved the music (some easy-listening Muzak crap that wouldnt impede on any conversation), the flowers (I said no flowers; he said that gay or straight, people like flowers, and we agreed on two roses), and my etiquette (apparently, according to the eighteenth-century British lord who appears to be trapped in the body of my younger brother, my table manners leave something to be desired, and however unbelievable it may sound, elbows do not belong on a table, ever). I was essentially his chauffeur as we went from place to place, preparing everything that he already had laid out in his head. The only thing that he let me be in charge of was what I would actually *say* to Otter (but he did say to keep it short and sweet. Oh, and to say it after we eat. And to look him in the eyes. And to not put my elbows on the table when I do it. And that maybe it should rhyme because they were learning about poetry in school).

So while I drove my little brother and planned his fantasy night of how I was going to give Otter the key to my soul (his words, not mine), I silently panicked and wrote lines of bad poetry. Normally, I am actually quite adept at writing poems and lyrics to songs Ill never sing, but this stuff was just atrocious. For example:

I love you

*You love me
Thank God for that
I'm so happy
And Tys personal favorite (which he helped on):
Otter! Otter! Otter!
Don't lead cows to slaughter!
I love you, and I know
I should've told you soon-a
But you didn't buy the dolphin-safe tuna!*

Ty asked me if I got the hidden message in his poem. I told him it was loud and clear.

So I panicked and planned the most elaborate and wonderfully terrifying night of my life. I thought I would have enough time to do everything that needed to get done. But then it was Wednesday, and I dropped Ty off at school for his last day. Then it was Wednesday afternoon, and I picked Ty up from school and took him to the Herrera household and dropped him off there. All the time between when I sent him to school and when I picked him up is a haze. Before he got out, he made me go through the checklist, and once he was satisfied that I had remembered everything (and after telling him *no* three times that I was certainly *not* going to use his poem) he gave me a hug and whispered that he loved me in my ear and told me he would see me on Sunday when they got back. To give you an idea of how much of a wreck I was, I only twice made him promise to call me so I knew he was okay. Okay, twice on the car ride there. Actually, I told him four times, and it was while we were parked in front of his friends house, but come on, I can be a mess and still be a good big brother.

I went back to the house and paced for another couple of hours, then, with no choice left, I packed up everything in the car and drove down to the beach. I grabbed Tys poem off the counter, just in case. The drive there was only ten minutes, but it was the longest ten minutes of my life. It only took me fifteen minutes to unpack the car, but it was the longest fifteen minutes of my life. It took me twenty minutes to set everything up, and it was the shortest twenty minutes of my life. To my horror. And then it was seven forty-five, and I changed quickly at the car and sprayed myself with a cologne that Ty had picked out. I started with one squirt but didnt think that was enough, so I ended up accidentally spraying on six more.

I went back to the beach to wait, smelling like a department-store tragedy. As

I crested the rise that looked down to where I had set up the table, the last rays of the sun shot out over the ocean, and I looked down and saw the white tablecloth flapping gently in the breeze, the candlelight flickering and the music drifting softly up toward me, and suddenly understood why Ty is a genius. It was perfect. Everything about it was just perfect. In a reality-dating-show kind of way.

I waited down at the beach, and right at eight I heard a car drive up. I picked up a flower and went and stood in front of the table, and I looked up at the hill and saw Otter reach the top, where I had just been moments ago. He was also in a tux, and I grinned with amusement as he wore no tie or cummerbund or shoes, as per instructions. He looked down at me, and his smile was so big it almost split the world in half. He walked slowly down the hill and stood in front of me, and I bowed slightly (per Ty) and presented the rose to him. He laughed quietly and accepted it and kissed me deeply on the lips, and it felt good, and I realized how much I had missed him over these past few days and how ready I was to do anything for him. If Creed had shown up right then, I would have told him everything. If Anna had shown up right then, I would have said everything anyway. Right as he pulled away, the crooked grin on his face, the gold-green shining, holding me in such a regard that I almost blurted it right then, I realized that I love him pure and simple. Its not a matter of logic or function. Its a matter of my heart.

So, its all perfect, right? Down to the last detail? Everything was going so well. And then everything happened at once.

“Uh, Bear?” Otter said to me.

“Yes?” I replied, falling into his eyes.

“Theres a seagull eating our food,” he told me, and it was the most romantic thing Id ever heard.

“I know, Otter. And thats why I did all this. I promised Ty I wasnt going to say this now, but I have to. Otter, I lo—wait, a what?”

He pointed over my shoulder. I turned and saw that a seagull had landed on the table and was picking through the food that I had so elegantly and delicately placed out. My eyes opened wide, and I squawked in anger and ran toward the stupid bird that was ruining everything. Otter was laughing behind me, and I planned to kill the bird and then kill him. I reached the table and clapped my hands together loudly, trying to frighten the seagull away. It hopped up and then landed back on the table. I waved my hands at it, puffing out my chest to make myself look bigger. It startled backward and knocked

over glasses and two of the candles. The candles fell over onto the table and immediately lit the tablecloth on fire. The seagull flapped its wings and started to lift from the table and proceeded to knock over the other two candles the other way and they ignited the other side of the table. I froze, staring at the table, listening to the bird fly away and listening to Otter still bellowing with laughter behind me. The CD player switched to a new song, and it was an easy-listening elevator rendition of Billy Ray Cyrus "Achy, Breaky Heart," and I didn't know how the night could get any worse. I grabbed one of the glasses and ran to the ocean, determined to get seawater to put out the fire so we could sit down and eat the food the seagull had not eaten. Or stepped on. Or defecated on. I filled the glass to the brim and was running back to pour the water out on the table when the sky above us opened up. The clouds that had seemed so far in the distance when I had first arrived here had snuck up on us, and now they broke wide open, and rain like I'd never seen it fell from the sky. I stood a couple of feet from the table, glass in hand, watching the small fires get doused by the rain. "Achy, Breaky Heart" died as the CD player shorted with a crackle, and all I could hear was the rain and Otter trying to catch his breath as the laughter died.

And that's where we are now. Brilliant idea, lousy execution.

Otter walks over to me, still chuckling softly to himself, his hair plastered against his forehead, his tux coat drenched through to the skin. He stands in front of me and takes the glass out of my hand and sets it back on the table. He cups my face in his hand and leans forward and kisses me gently on the lips. He pulls away and grins his grin and raises my hand, and I see he is still clasping the rose and is now pressing it into my hand. I look back into his eyes.

"Otter. Otter. Otter," I mutter.

"Yes, Bear?" he says beautifully.

"Don't lead cows to slaughter," I say.

He arches an eyebrow. "Come again?"

I take a deep breath. "I... love you and I know I should've told ya soon."

His eyes widen slightly. "Wait, what? You... me?"

I shake my head. "But you didn't buy the dolphin-safe tuna."

"Bear, what the hell? Did you just... rhyme?"

I nod. "I wrote it. Ty helped. He learned poetry in school."

He leans in and kisses me again, his mouth tasting like rain. He pulls back again, but only far enough so he can speak. I open my eyes, and his are open,

and my God, they're everything. "Was all this for me?" he whispers above the rain.

"Yeah."

"And did you mean what... you just said?"

I don't hesitate. "I did. I do. I love you, Otter."

He presses his forehead to mine. "I love you too, Bear," he says, and then his lips are on mine, and we are on fire, and we burn the world.

10. Where Bear Sees the Eye of the Storm

So I said it.

I said it and it came out easier than I had hoped, easier than it should have been. There was a moment that night, when he entered me for the first time, that I felt as full as I'd ever been. I'm not trying to be graphic or anything, because I don't necessarily mean that in a sexual way at all. Okay, yes, I guess I kind of do mean it that way, as there was a pinch and then pain, but then I rose above it, and it was like I was floating above myself, detached and high. I only had a dim sense of what was happening to me, but then a shock wave rose through me, and I was slammed back into my body and rode it out in a blur of gasps and claws. As I came (without even touching myself; how does that even happen?), something inside me exploded as I shot onto my chest and my pleasure-drunk brain could only think of God creating the universe. First was nothing and then there was *everything*. Otter held me as my body rocked and shook, and for the first time, I realized there was such a thing as *good* earthquakes, that as long as you have someone to tether you to them, the shifting of the world can be a wondrous thing. It still scared me shitless, but I wasn't about to allow that to take him away from me. Not anymore.

So quickly, inevitably, the days passed.

Otter kept his promise to me and didn't try to push me about anything. I think it's because Ty was right, that Otter just needed to hear how I truly felt about him. Any tension that had remained evaporated, and we were able to discover what we had meant when we'd vocalized our feelings for each other. A day never went by, regardless if we had fought or not, when I didn't know how he felt about me. I tried to make sure he felt the same.

I often contemplated on how different it was for me and him than it was for me and Anna. I still remember the first time I'd told Anna that I loved her. We were fifteen, and it was sweet and I'd meant it, as much as a fifteen-year-old male *could* mean it. She had given me such a smile, then proceeded to punch me in the arm and say that she knew. I felt like the top of the world then. With Otter, though, I passed the top a long time ago. I didn't know that a person could feel so much for another and not burst.

As I said, Otter kept his promise to me, and as much as I knew it probably strained him at points, I couldn't help but admire his patience. If I were him, I would've probably kicked me to the curb time and time again. Don't get me wrong: he still got exasperated at times, times when I went through my panic modes where I was just sure that everyone knew about us and that they were all talking about us behind our backs. But I never saw that shadow cross his face after that night on the beach. I had been the one causing it, and I was the only one who could have taken it away.

During the next two months, things changed in my life, changed in ways I had never thought possible.

Ty came back from his camping trip the Sunday following the best date disaster that I have ever been on. I talked to him multiple times on his trip, and no matter how many times he asked, I refused to tell him what happened. He would howl at me over the phone and demand to speak to Otter. I would say good-bye and hang up. A few seconds later, Otter's phone rang, and Ty complained some more when I answered that one as well. Otter and I drove over to the Herrera house that Sunday and were both amused to see Ty sitting on the curb, his bags next to him, scowling and tapping his knee impatiently. "Well?" he said, opening the front passenger door to Otter's Jeep and climbing inside onto my lap.

I hugged him. "Hey, Kid," I said happily. "How was your trip?"

He ignored me and looked at Otter. "Well?" he said again.

Otter grinned. "Did you have a good time camping?"

Ty's glared back and forth between me and Otter. I could hear Otter struggling to keep a steady composure. I was trying to think of sad things and gross things to keep my mirth at bay. I had started to replay where Bambis mom had gotten shot over and over in my head when the Kid grinned at me evilly and turned to Otter and said, "Bear likes to be spanked during sex."

There was a beat of silence in the car, and then Otter couldn't hold it in any longer and lost it, which in turn caused me to start laughing. The Kid sat, growling through his teeth as he stared back and forth between us like we were fucking nuts. When at last we were able to calm down (but not before Otter shot me a lust-filled look that told me we'd be talking about *that* later) I leaned forward and wrapped my arms around the Kid and told him how amazingly horrible it had gone. I got to the part where I told him I recited his poem, and his face broke out with such a glow that I started laughing again.

"Did you get the extra meaning from what I wrote?" he asked Otter when I

finished.

Otter grinned and mussed his hair. "I sure did, Kid. That's why we're taking you to a steak house right now for dinner. Welcome home."

The Kid laughed and laughed and laughed.

ANNA and I started talking again, maybe three weeks after the Kid came home. It came out of nowhere as we both still carried an unintentional intention to steer clear of one another. Every week I'd go to work and hold my breath as I pulled up the schedule for the following week, praying that we were on different shifts. For the most part, it worked out that way. If she worked days, I worked nights, and vice versa. Oh sure, our paths crossed every now and then, but only for a few moments, and nothing was ever exchanged between the two of us. I knew that she had been the one to do this, to go to the scheduling manager and request that we work opposite of each other. I was relieved and sad all at the same time. Those brief moments that I did see her, we were both so busy ignoring each other that we never took the time to test the waters, to see if either one of us would be receptive to any kind of contact. To be honest, however unfair it sounds, I had begun to let her slip quietly away from me. There were still times when I would pore over the schedule and there were still times when I would breathe those sighs of relief, but that was all it was. I never really believed in out of sight, out of mind, as the two people in the world that'd ever been in that position (Otter and my mom) had always been there, picking and prying at my thoughts. One of them had come home to me, the other was never coming back.

So imagine my surprise when I showed up for work one night to work the last half of a closing shift as a favor to a friend and found Anna working the late shift as well. Not only would she be working the late shift, but she would be the last one there from nine until eleven, on a Tuesday night, when we'd be the slowest. I cursed silently when I saw her as I arrived and swore loudly when Mary, the other cashier (she of Juicy-Fruit fame), poked her head into the office and said she was going home.

"Fine," I muttered, accidentally snapping the pencil I had been using to fill purchase orders.

"You know, this might be a good time for you," she said from the doorway, sounding amused.

"A good time for what?" I asked, not bothering to look up.

"To go and talk to Anna, Bear," she told me. "You guys haven't really talked since...." She stopped.

Thats when I did look up, suspiciously. “Since when?”

She had the common decency to blush. “You know,” she said, fidgeting.

“Since you guys broke up and all.”

“I didnt know that was anyones business but ours,” I said coldly. Mary shrugged. “She didnt give me any specifics, Bear, if thats what youre worried about. Im just saying, youve been together since before you even knew what that meant. Dont you think she deserves something?”

“Like what?” I ask, doing nothing to keep the anger from my voice. “She broke up with me!”

Mary looks me squarely in the eye. “What did you do to give her reason to?”

I looked back down at the paperwork in front of me and began writing again.

“Nothing,” I grumbled.

She sighed. “Bear, just—just dont be all machismo on this. Sometimes the best thing a guy can do is admit hes wrong and try to make amends. Do you know how many times Frank and I have broken up?” Frank was her biker boyfriend, the only biker in all of Seafare. He was big and burly (a bear of a man, if you will) and had steel-toed boots and chaps and a leather coat with fringes all over it. But saying youre the only biker in Seafare is like saying youre the smartest kid in remedial English. Big whoop.

“Its not the same,” I told Mary, wishing she would drop it. “Its done this time.”

“Do you want it to be done?” she asked me curiously.

I hesitated, only for a moment, but I instantly felt guilty. I *did* want it to be done, and I knew we would never go back to where we were, but that it was more me than her. Even if she would take me back, and even if I wanted to go there again, I knew that for the rest of my life, I would know that something was missing, that I was missing a crucial piece of me that completed the puzzle. *Awww, thats so sweet, Bear!* it chuckled. *This is going so much easier now! Good job. You’re welcome.*

“I do,” I said to Mary quietly, and she didnt say any more, and when I looked up again, she was gone. I heard her voice as she called good night to Anna, and then the doors *whoosh* opened and closed, and Anna and I were the only ones left, for another two hours. I started staring at the clock, counting down the seconds.

At nine thirty, the phone rang. “Thanks for calling The Food Warehouse. This is Bear. How can I help you?” I said glumly, staring at the clock as a few more seconds clicked by.

“It sounds so hot when you say that,” a voice said huskily in my ear.

I grinned and rolled my eyes and for a moment, everything was fine. “You think thats hot? Maybe I should read off the produce order, and we can see where this goes.”

Otter chuckled. “Bring it home with you, and well talk. Hows work going?”

I glanced up at the clock again. It was still nine thirty. “Meh,” I told him. “Its better now. What are you doing? Hows the Kid?”

I heard Otter switch the phone from one ear to the other. “Well,” he said, “he was going to wait up until you got here, but I got him drunk and then gave him Nyquil and then chained him to his bed. We may just have to get naked when you get done.”

“You drugged my little brother so you could sleep with me?” I asked, amused.

He snorted. “Its easier to do that than drug *my* little brother so I can sleep with you. Creed wouldnt fall for that in a million years.”

“Thanks for watching him tonight.”

“Oh, please. You think you had to twist my arm to get me to come over here? Im getting ready to knock Creed into next week, so it was good for me to get away for a while.”

This was news to me. “Huh?” I asked. “Why, whats he doing?”

There was a pause, and then Otter sighed into the phone. “Hes being... Creed.” He laughed, but it sounded forced. “He keeps asking me whats going on between me and Jonah.”

“Jonah?” I said, flabbergasted. “Why would he ask about *him*?”

“I dont know. He brings him up every now and then, asking me if I talked to him lately. He thinks that my so-called „return to normalcy has to do with the fact that Jonah and I are talking again. Which were not,” he added quickly.

I felt a small twinge of jealousy, but I pushed it away. “Well, whatever,” I said, trying to keep any bitterness from my voice. “Let Creed think what he wants. You can come over to my house anytime.” I heard his grin through the phone, and I closed my eyes, picturing his face, crooked smile and all. Heat brushed slowly through my body, and I marveled again how quickly he could make me feel that way.

“Everything else good?” he asked happily.

“Well....”

“What?”

I got up as quiet as I could and peered out the door to the registers. Anna

stood with her back to me about twenty feet away, flipping through a magazine. I went back to the chair and lowered my voice as best I could. "Annas working tonight."

"She is? Has she tried to talk to you at all?"

"No."

He laughed. "Have you been in the office all night?"

"No!" I said. Then, "Yes."

"Maybe you should go talk to her," he said thoughtfully. "She did say she still wanted to be a part of your life, and I know the Kid misses her sometimes."

"He does?" I asked bewildered. That was the first I'd heard of it.

"Yeah, he brings it up every now and then. He asks how shes doing and if Ive talked to her."

"Have you?"

He snorted again. "What do you think, Bear?"

"I dont know, Otter. What would I say to her? Sorry we broke up, and I havent spoken to you in a month, but dont worry about me, Ive had a dick up my ass?"

He laughed loudly. "Dont be so crass," he playfully admonished me. "If you cant think of anything to say, then maybe you shouldnt. But I think you guys are going to hate yourselves down the road if you dont try to work something out." He paused. "But dont go working *too* much out. I think I would have a problem with that."

"Right," I scoffed. "*That's* going to happen."

"Good. So, what have you got to lose?"

"I hate it when youre right."

"You must hate it a lot, then. Im always right."

I groaned. "Youre such a fucking dork."

"Yeah, but Im *your* fucking dork, and dont you forget that. And tell Anna to keep her grubby hands off of you. Ive never hit a girl, and I dont want to start now."

I laughed. "Okay," I said. "Ill go talk to her."

"Alright. You can tell me what happens when you get home." I couldnt help but feel a little giddy when he said that: *home*. Not *when you get here* or *your house* but *home*. Like it was his home too. *Down, boy*, I told myself. *You're not setting up house just yet.*

"Bye, Otter," I said, blushing furiously.

“Hey,” he said.

“Hey yourself,” I said back.

“I love you.”

Home, I thought again. “I love you too,” I said quietly, and he hummed contentedly and disconnected.

I hung up the phone and looked down at the paperwork before me. I knew that if I started working on it again that I would not move from that spot until she was gone. What Otter had said, that me and Anna would regret it down the road, bounced around in my head. Would we? Would one of us look back one day and feel a pang of guilt at not at least attempting to build back the bridge that we had once had between us? Granted, anything we put up now would never be as grand as it was, but didn't she deserve to at least have something? I remembered what she'd said to me that last night we had fought: *You've broken my heart, but it was mine to give*. If she could give that to me, then I could do my best to give her something in return, no matter how small. Sighing, I pushed my way up from the chair again and walked out to the floor. I glanced down the aisles as I approached her and saw that the store was empty. She heard the sounds of my footfalls and looked up, surprised. I smiled weakly. She looked startled for a moment then smiled back, just as small. I felt a pinprick of relief and closed the distance between us until I stood only a few feet away.

“Hey,” she said.

“Hey, yourself,” I said back, remembering how Otter had just followed that exchange with *I love you*. I laughed silently to myself, wondering what Anna would think if she could hear my thoughts.

“Whats up?” she asked me.

“Nothing. Whats up with you?”

Anna cocked her head to the side, as if trying to gauge my sincerity. “Same old, same old,” she said slowly. She glanced back down at her magazine and then back at me, trying to decide which she should focus on.

“Thats good, right?” I said, obviously sounding extremely intelligent.

“I guess.”

An awkward silence dumped itself between us. I wrung my hands harshly, and she sat with her head still tilted to the side. I tried to think of something to say and was dumbfounded when I couldn't think of a single word. Here was a girl that I had known since I was eight, a girl who I'd grown up with, slept with, conversed with, did *everything* with. And here I was, a month later, not

able to say a goddamn thing. I groaned inwardly as I began to realize that this was a very bad idea. I thought of eight or nine ways to retreat, but she spoke again.

“Hows the Kid?” she asked.

“Oh, good!” I said relieved. “Hes all finished with school now so hes... good.”

She nods her head agreeably. “Thats good.”

“Yeah, its good.” *Stop saying good!* “He wanted me to say hi,” I lied, as he never said anything of the sort to me.

“Well, tell him hi back for me.”

“Will do,” I said, sweating. It seemed like a good time to run away. I waved jerkily and had turned to flee back into my cave, when she said my name. I froze, wanting to keep moving forward and slam the door behind me and hide until she left. But I turned.

Her face had softened, and her eyes were kind. “Howre you?” she asked.

“Im fine,” I said, forcing a smile.

“Well, Im happy for that, then,” she says quietly. “Ive worried about you, Bear.”

“Why?”

“Because youre the type to never worry about yourself. Someones got to do it for you,” she said sadly.

“You dont need to do that,” I said. “I can take care of myself.”

She shook her head. “Thats not what I meant. I know youre perfectly capable of taking care of yourself. And of Ty. I mean, youve done it for years, right?”

“Right,” I said, not knowing what else to say.

She sighed. “So I ask myself why I worry about you when you obviously dont need me to. Youve never needed me to, but here I am, doing it anyways.”

I winced. “Oh, come on, Anna. You know thats not true.”

She looked away. “But you know it is. Its not that you didnt *want* me to. Its just that you didnt need it. I think that was part of our problem.”

“I guess,” I said, not really sure what she was talking about.

“Hows Otter?” she asked, quickly changing tact. It made me wonder if she was trying to catch me off guard, trying to make me say something. To trick me.

“Uh, fine, I guess,” I said, acting like I hadnt just spoken to him a few minutes before, hadnt just heard him say how hot I sound, hadnt just said I

loved him.

“Do you get to see him a lot?” she asked.

I shrugged. “Im over at Creeds a lot. Hes always there.” I stopped, letting her fill in the blanks to whatever mad-lib is going through her head.

Anna nodded. “Thats good.”

“What is?”

“That youre hanging out with Creed. You know, before he leaves,” she told me, averting her eyes slightly. She only does that when shes not being completely honest, and for the billionth time, I wondered what she knew, or what she thought she knew. It would be so easy, I told myself then, to just open my mouth and tell her everything and end the goddamn speculating that was apparently running rampant through her head. But no matter how hard I tried, no matter what I did, my lips stayed glued shut, and I said nothing.

Then the doors *whooshed* open again and a couple of teenagers walked in and nodded a greeting toward us, and Anna smiled at them, and I took that moment to look at her without her knowing. She was beautiful still. I smiled painfully as I suddenly remembered everything about her. It was like that part of me had gone into storage, and I was looking through the boxes for old times sake. She caught me looking and stared at me questioningly, but I shook my head and muttered something about how I had to go. She shrugged, but I caught something in her eyes, something just underneath the indifference. I dont know what it was, but it was there. I turned my head and walked away. I could feel her eyes on my back. I got into the office and closed the door and sank down against it to the floor, my heart beating rapidly. I tried to conjure up that look in her eye again so I could rack my brain for what it was, but all I saw was that gold-green, and I wanted to go home. *Home*.

When it was closing time, I waited for Anna to walk out the door, and I locked it behind her. When I turned, she was still standing behind me, watching me with those big eyes of hers. I looked down at my feet, unsure of what to say. I felt like I should say *something* because it wasnt just me I was watching out for, but the Kid as well. He needed as much of us around him as we could possibly get, and I knew that Anna was an integral part of his life. I tried to think of what I could say, what I could do, that would make her understand that he (I? we?) needed her to be there. Nothing came to mind, and I started to drown under a great wave of sadness. I heard her chuckle softly, and I looked back up.

She smiled at me. “Always thinking of things,” she said softly. “Youve always done that. Its one of the things that made me fall....” She paused, almost as if she was thinking shed be better off not finishing. But then she did: “Its a thing that made me love you.”

“I still love you, Anna,” I whispered. “Just... just not in the way I feel like I should.”

“Why, Bear? What is it about you that makes you not able to love me?”

There she was, giving me another opening, another chance to level the playing field, to be completely 100 percent truthful with her. And thats when I knew for sure that she understood what Otter meant to me and what I meant to him. It was a realization that I couldve come to a long time before, if I hadnt been so damned scared about what it could mean. Id had my inklings, my suspicions that she knew about me and Otter, but that was the moment when I could no longer doubt what it was she saw in me, in us. I opened my mouth to finally be honest with her because, I told myself, didnt she deserve it? Out of everyone in the world (aside from Otter, of course), hadnt she earned the right to know? Id lead her down a path in which there was no alternative, no other way around. Because, you see, as soon as that epiphany struck me about her, another one hit just as fast: I knew that regardless of how it would have happened, regardless of how long it would have taken, Otter would have found me again, or I would have found him. Id always thought the idea of fate was for fools and Celine Dion. It would seem, though, that it was only a matter of time.

“Because I cant,” I said, hating myself for not being able to give her what she asked for. “It has nothing to do with you, Anna. Its something about me.”

She nodded and looked away, but not before I saw the hurt in her eyes, hurt that I had once again caused. I cursed myself silently, wondering what in Gods name it would take for me to finally be able to tell the truth. Anything would be better than seeing that look on her face. Anything. Even if I told her, and she looked at me the same way, at least then she would have had justifiable reason to do so. Maybe she could... maybe she *would*—

“Anna?” I said, my breath hitching in my chest. “Anna, I—”

“No, Bear,” she whispered, shaking. “I cant do this now. I cant. I thought you were ready to—to tell me. I thought you could one day open up and tell me all that youre hiding from me.”

“Im *trying*,” I said harshly. “This isnt something thats easy for me!”

Her eyes flashed. “Its not making it any easier if you keep it all to yourself!”

she shouts. "How can I ever hope to be there for you if you dont trust me!" I couldnt look at her. Eventually I heard her footsteps as she walked away. As soon as I got home, Otter saw the look on my face and swept me up in those big arms of his and cradled me like I was nothing more than a child. *It's okay*, he whispered in my ear. *It's okay*. As I began to calm, my thoughts strayed to the revelation Id had earlier, the one about him and me. I knew then that I had to do everything in my power to make sure he stayed with me. I had to do everything to make sure I never lost him. Call it fate, call it destiny, call it a cyclone of raging hormones, I dont care. Much like I think that Ty would be lost without me, I knew Id be lost with Otter. So time passed, and there were good days and there were bad days. There were days where the sun shone so bright that it felt like I was staring directly into it. There were days when I could feel the ocean lapping at my foot and thunder rumbling in the distance, never coming closer, but always making its presence known. There were days that I felt as high as Id ever been in my life, but they were followed by the feeling of falling into a chasm that never ended. Through it all, though, he was there. He tethered me to him, my magnetic north, while my mind went here or there. I always knew. Somehow I always knew.

I_{VE} heard it said those couples that fight are the ones that stay together.

That disagreements and arguments strengthen relationships. Ill be the first to say thats bullshit. Otter and I rarely fought about anything, and when we did, it was over stupid petty crap that one of us was too stubborn to let go. There were minor things, inconsequential to everybody and everything. Im talking like me canceling plans to have to work or Otter not taking pictures anymore (I knew, though, that if I continued to press *that* one, that we would have a huge blowout, so I always stopped). You know: things that are easy to get over and you wonder why you were even remotely pissed off in the first place. But I dont mean to say that we never had a big one, one that left us both shaking and licking our wounds. All I can remember is that while I was screaming at him and he was lashing out at me, I wished it was over. And when it was, both of us were wide-eyed, and I felt sick and never wanted to do anything like that again. If this was what strengthened relationships, then I was fine with where ours was.

It all started because of Creed.

“W^{HERES} the Kid?” Creed asked me as I walked into his house a couple of

weeks after my conversation with Anna.

“Hes hanging out with his friend Gage,” I told him. I closed the door behind me and immediately started listening for sounds of my boyfriend, wondering why he hadn't come thumping down the stairs yet.

“Gage?” Creed asked. “I thought his friends name is Alex.” I rolled my eyes.

“Apparently he made another one. I swear to God, theyre popping up everywhere. I didnt know this many people went to his school.” Much like I was trying to work at everything else, I was making an attempt to let the Kid go do his own thing. He seemed to be shedding his former self like it was a dusty old skin that hed been wrapped up in for too long. I was doing my very best to try not to get in the way of his newfound affinity for anything and everything Kid-like. There were more overnights, more can-he-go-out-and-plays. I was worried and scared, but constantly told myself that I wasnt being fair to either of us. Besides, with him doing his own thing every now and then, it gave Otter and me some much-deserved alone time.

“Thats cool,” Creed said. “You okay with it?”

I shrugged, half-listening to him, half-listening for Otter. “I think hes earned it. At least I know its something he *wants* to be doing.” Creed nodded.

“Well, thats good.” He paused, considering something in his head before he said it. He opened his mouth to speak and then closed it again.

I crossed my arms. “What?”

He grinned. “I may have to bow out of tonight. I kinda-sorta forgot that Id made plans.”

I raised an eyebrow at him. Wed said we were going to barbecue tonight while the weather was good. It was late July, and it had been hot, hot for the first time since I could remember. The ocean was still cold as hell, but we could stand on the beach without worrying about freezing our asses off. But Creed leaving had its advantages. I hated to admit it at the time, but I was relieved at this turn of events, more so than I probably should have been. With Creed out of the house, it would leave Otter and me to do...

Otter and Bear things.

“Where you running off to?” I asked, trying to push the thought of riding Otter until we both came out of my head.

He shrugged. “Just out... with some friends.”

“Who?”

“No one you know,” he said vaguely, averting his eyes.

I snorted. “What arent you saying, Creed?” *It looks like we’re both keeping secrets*, I thought, not as amused at the prospect as I thought I’d be. He waved his arm in the air in that dismissive Creed sort of way. “Its nothing you have to worry your little head about,” he said. “Just going to go out and see what trouble I can find.”

I laughed. “You sure you dont want company?” I asked, instantly regretting the offer.

He saved me by saying, “Nah. You and Otter can hang here and have more fun than I probably will.”

“You okay?” I asked him, seeing sweat on his forehead. *Maybe he’s got a boyfriend too*, it whispers. *Wouldn’t that just be the sweet definition of irony*. I pushed it away.

Creed grinned again, and it looked a little false. “Im fine, Papa Bear. Like I said, its nothing for you to worry about. Ill probably get bored and come home early.”

“Alright,” I said, eyeing him again. I looked around, annoyed that his brother hadn’t shown himself yet. “Wheres Otter?”

Creed jerked his head, indicating that his brother was upstairs. I looked up and saw his door was shut. I glanced back at Creed, who brought his finger to his lips and motioned for me to follow him. I looked back at the door and walked after Creed. He went through the kitchen to the patio door and opened it, walking outside. I chased after him, suddenly wondering why everyone seem to be harboring secrets these days. He closed the door behind me and turned to me.

“Well?” I asked him, trying to keep the edge off my voice. “Why do we have to go outside?”

“I dont want Otter to hear me. He thinks I meddle enough,” he said, sitting down on an expensive Adirondack chair that sat in the backyard.

“Meddle about what?” I asked, not wanting to know.

He shook his head and put his arms up and back, stretching. “You know,” he said, “Ive only got Otters best interests at heart. I dont know

why he doesnt see it that way.”

It was hot but I felt a chill. “What did you do?”

He looked surprised. “*I didnt do anything. Jesus Christ, you guys are spending way too much time together. Youre starting to sound like him.*” I shrugged, ignoring the comment. “Fine,” I conceded, “what did he do?”

“Its what hes *been* doing, Bear. I mean, come on: youve seen him. Hes been skipping around here for the last two months like he hasnt a goddamn care in the world. He wont tell me whats going on. And from what youve told me,” he said, looking at me pointedly, “he hasnt said anything to you, either.”

“Maybe theres nothing to say, Creed. Cant a person be happy and not have to have some big reason for it?”

He laughed. “You would think so, but no. Not with Otter. You should know that as well as I do. That guy wears his heart on his sleeve. If there is something for him to be happy about, he shows it. Just like if something is tearing him up, he shows that too. Remember when he first got here?” I nodded.

“Id never seen him like that before,” Creed said, looking out over his backyard. “I didnt know what to do. But then I go away for a couple of weeks, and I come back, and I see him like Ive never seen him before again. But its completely opposite, right? Like hes found the greatest thing in the world, and hes over the goddamn moon about it. At first I thought he was bipolar or some shit, but it hasnt gone away. For two fucking months now, its been all happy and rosy. I want to know what the hell happened to make him turn around like that.”

I looked down at my hands, trying not to show the glow that had started to burn through my body. *Its because of me*, I thought, filling with wonder. *Your brother is like that because of me.*

I made up my mind in that instant and was about to tell Creed everything when he said, “I think its because of Jonah.”

Uh—what?

“Jonah?” I spat, unable to keep the venom from my voice. Creed didnt seem to notice.

“Yeah, I think he and Jonah started to work things out, and thats whats going on with him. I ask him about it, and of course he denies it like the little bitch he is, but I hear them talking on the phone every now and then. I

can never make out what they're saying, no matter how hard I try. But what else is there? It's not like he's fucking anyone else here in Seafare. He's either with me, or he's with you. And I can guarantee it's not either of us that's making him all giddy and gay."

My mind wouldn't compute. "He talks to Jonah on the phone?" I asked stupidly.

Creed glanced over at me, completely oblivious to the fact that seawater had made its way up to my knees in just a few seconds. He couldn't hear the storm just off the coast because it was in my head. It's always in my head.

"Every once in a while, they do," he told me. "But like I said, he won't tell me anything about it."

"Why would he be talking to *him*?" I asked, more to myself than to Creed.

"Why wouldn't he?" Creed said, perplexed. "Jonah used to be his boyfriend. Otters not the kind of person that can just wipe someone away." And those words sounded familiar, and then I remembered that Otter had said the same thing, right after we'd had sex the first time. We lay in my bed, and he told me that he couldn't just get rid of someone so quickly, not when they've been a huge part of his life. I remembered feeling sad that I would never have that part of Otter's past, and I remembered feeling slight twinges of jealousy. However, it was nothing compared to what I felt right then. Not even *close*.

My teeth ground together as I said, "So you think it's all Jonah? You think *Jonah's* the reason why he's happy?" *IT'S NOT HIM!* I wanted to scream. *IT WILL NEVER BE HIM AGAIN! I'M THE ONE THAT MAKES OTTER HAPPY! IT'S BECAUSE OF ME, YOU SON OF A BITCH!* But of course, naturally, predictably, I said nothing.

Creed shrugged. "Like I said, Bear, I don't know what else it could be. He only talks to us, the Kid, and Jonah. I know it's nothing we've done. So by process of elimination, who does that leave?"

Now, I knew he was wrong, or at least that's what I tried to tell myself.

It couldn't be Jonah, because it was me. I was the reason Otter had changed, the reason he'd been happy over the last two months. Hell, I was the reason he came home in the first place. *He came home for me.* Jonah was no longer a part of this. Or so I had thought. *Why the hell is he talking to Jonah?* I thought, my mind racing. *Why the hell is he talking to him, and why the hell has he never said anything to me about it? That's all in the past! That's all*

supposed to be in his past! I thought maybe it was because he was unhappy with me for some reason. I thought it was because I wasn't as good a lay as Jonah. I thought it was because I was effectively keeping Otter in the closet. I thought it was because I made him *promise* to stay in the closet about this. I thought so many things, each more irrational than the last, but I couldn't help it. I've said it before: I've never been the jealous type. With Anna, I knew that any guy who hit on her would be getting nowhere. We'd always make fun of them later. With Anna, that was never an issue. *So why is it one with him?* it asked. *If you love him like you've never loved anyone in your life, then why can't you trust him on this?*

I couldn't answer.

"Bear?" Creed said, breaking me from the storm. "You okay?" "Yeah," I muttered, not okay at all.

"I thought I lost you there for a second," he said, staring at me. "You looked like you were going to throw up."

"Creed, there's something I need to tell you." The words were out before I could stop them.

"What, Bear?" Creed asked.

This was it. This was going to be the moment. This was going to be the time that I told him. I was going to tell him something I should have told him a long time ago. He deserved as much. He was my brother. He'd seen me at my worst and at my best. He held me as I cried when my mother left. If he could do that, then fuck him if he couldn't accept this. My mind was wild, and it burned, but oh my God, I had to do this.

"I'm sorry I didn't say—" I started but was interrupted as the patio door behind me opened and Otter came out.

"Hey, what's up?" He grinned at me, that lopsided, beautiful grin. "I didn't hear you get here."

"That's because you were being all lovey-dovey on the phone," Creed snorted. "Jesus Christ, Otter, I don't know why you don't just tell us about Jonah. I know you were talking to him on the phone. Even Bear agrees with me. Right, Bear?" Creed looked over at me and dropped a wink, and I wanted to punch him in the throat.

"Right, Creed," I said hollowly, the water up to my chest.

"See?" Creed said, laughing. "Now just fucking give it up and tell us! When are we going to meet the future Mrs. Otter Thompson? You might as well bring him here. Can you imagine Mom and Dad? That's going to be

fucking hilarious!” Creed broke off into another gale of laughter, unaware that he was the only one that found something funny. I could feel Otters eyes on me, and as much I as I didnt want to, I turned to him. His gaze was surprised and sad and wary all at the same time. He recoiled slightly when he saw what was in mine, and I did nothing to stop it. *So close, I thought bitterly. So close to finally being honest.*

What’s stopping you? the voice asked. You can still set this right. Tell Creed to shut the hell up for one goddamn second and tell him. Make him understand that no one, not him, certainly not Jonah, can make Otter happy like you do. It’s not too late to tell the truth. It’s never too late to tell the truth.

But I didnt, and at first I couldnt understand why. I stared at Otter, and he stared back at me, and Creed laughed and laughed, and then it hit me: the reason I didnt say anything was because Otter had done nothing to deny what Creed had said. He sat there, gawking at me, and he did nothing to refute, nothing to take it away. I grit my teeth together, relishing the pressure it put on my jaw. I had lightning in my ears and seawater in my nose. I felt like I was drowning.

“Well, I can see youre going to be as forthright as always,” Creed said, looking down at his watch. “Ive got to get out of here to go... do that thing I said I had to do.” I took note on how his voice had hesitated, but it was washed away, trapped in the tide. Creed stood and patted me on the back, telling me he would see me later. He chuckled as he playfully punched Otter on the shoulder and walked past him. The patio door shut behind him. I heard his keys jingle through the glass, and then the front door opened and closed. I heard the car door open and shut. I heard the car start. I heard the car drive away. I heard all this above the storm raging in my head and heart. Otter sighed and walked up to me and hunkered down before me. When he normally did this, Id always found it slightly endearing. This time, though, I just glared at him.

“Bear,” he said, reaching up to grab my hand.

“Dont,” I growled at him, pulling my hand away like he was going to scald me.

I stood up and pushed past him, about to walk back into the house (to go inside? to walk away?) but before I could make it to the door, Otter grabbed my arm. I struggled in vain to break free. His massive paw gripped me tightly, and finally I turned to glare at him.

“Where are you going?” he asked me, an edge in his voice. “Were you just going to leave and not even talk about this?”

“I would think,” I scowled at him, “that if you wanted to talk about this, you would have told me about it already. Tell me, Otter: just how many times have you talked to Jonah?”

He maintained his grip on my arm. His eyes were hard. “Bear, its not what you think,” he told me, his voice flat. “Whatever it is thats running through your head right now, you need to stop.”

“Why cant you answer the question?” I suddenly shouted at him. I saw him recoil, but he didnt let go of my arm. “How many times! Why the hell are you talking to him?”

“I talk to him every now and then,” Otter said, and I could tell he was trying to keep his voice level. “Its never about anything important, Bear. I told you before. I cant just knock someone out of my life like that. Its not who I am.”

I continued to glare at him, and then there were two Otters and then four Otters, and I felt the bitter sting of angry tears as they welled in my eyes. He saw them, too, and his face softened, and his grip relaxed on my arm. “Did you tell him about me?” I asked, willing the water in my eyes to go away. It didnt. “Did you tell him about us?”

Of all the questions I could have asked, I knew this one pained him the most. Before he spoke I knew the answer and shook my arm loose from his hand. I turned away from him and put my forehead up against the glass of the patio door, and it was cool and hard. One of the angry tears defied me and slipped from my eye and landed on my cheek and tracked its way down.

“What do you talk to him about?” I asked. “Whats so goddamn important that you need to talk to him?”

I heard Otter exhale noisily behind me, but it came from where he stood before. It meant that he was not trying to come over to me. Good. “I told you, Bear, I cant just cut—”

“Thats not what I asked! *What do you talk about?*”

“It doesnt matter, Bear,” he said dully. “Apparently you wouldnt believe me regardless, seeing as how youve already made up your mind. Since when did you stop trusting me?”

I whirled on him. “Since when did you decide to not tell me about *secret* phone calls with your ex-boyfriend?” I snapped at him.

“Ive never given you a reason not to trust me.”

“Until *now*,” I spat at him. “You *lied* to me.” Somewhere inside of me, the voice was screaming to just hear him out, to calm down and let him say what he needed to. I shoved it away.

Otter looked at me then, and I knew I had wounded him. “Bear,” he said quietly, “what do you think could possibly be going on? Hes in California. Im here. With you. Thats not going to change.”

“Then why do you need to talk to him in the first place?” I raged at him.

“What does he give you that I cant?”

And there we have it, boys and girls, the big question, the thought that was playing in the back of my head. I figured the only reason Otter would be talking to stupid fucking *Jonah* (what kind of a name is that, anyway?) was because he was getting something from him that he couldnt get from me. What, you ask, could that possibly be? I had no fucking clue, but it was what I latched onto, it was the fear that I was afraid of the most. Otter shook his head. “I cant believe that you would think... Bear, I love you. Do you really believe I would say that and do something to jeopardize it?”

“You’re not... *answering... the question*,” I hissed at him. His eyes went hard again, and I saw a tic along his jaw line. “Fine!” he shouted at me, his anger boiling over. “You want to know what we talk about? You want to know so bad, Bear? You want to know what Ive been doing for him?”

Suddenly, I didnt want to know. Not because of what he said, but because Id never seen Otter like that before. But it was too late. “Every time he calls me, *every goddamn time*, I answer the phone. I know what Im walking into when I do it, but I fucking pick it up anyways. And you know what he says, Bear? Every time he calls me, its to berate me, its to wound me, its to cut me down. I get on the phone, and he yells at me and screams at me and hates me, and I let him. You want to know why? I do it because I think its the only way hell get over it. I think if I let him slice me with his words, hell finally give up one day. I do it because regardless of what we had, regardless what I have now, hes still my friend. And friends dont just fucking quit on each other, just because things get hard. So yes, I talk to him, and yes, it hurts every time I do, but not because Im in love with him, or because Im harboring some secret desire to get back together with him. It hurts because I made him like that. I made him an angry person, and so I think the only thing I can do is let him take out his

goddamn anger on me. I deserve it, dont I? *Don't I?* I know it sounds ridiculous. Believe me, I know that every time my phone rings, and I see that its him. I dont want to answer it, but I have to because its *my fault he is the way he is.*"

I tried to interrupt, to stop this thing that Id started, but he glared at me as I opened my mouth, and it shut on its own.

"So I let him say whatever the hell he wants until he feels better, and then he goes away. I couldve stopped this a long time ago, Bear, I know it. But you want to know what he told me? What he said to make me do this every time he calls? He said that he wanted to come here. That he wanted to come to Seafare so we could talk face to face. Yes, I want him to be happy. I want to try and be his friend, but I do it because I dont want him to come here. If he comes here, hell see you, and I dont want that to happen. *But not in the way you're thinking.*" He took in a ragged breath, and I wanted him to stop. I wanted him to stop so bad. I couldnt deal with his anger anymore, that acidic feeling it caused in my heart and stomach. But he wasnt finished.

"I dont want him to come here and see you because Im afraid that hell scare you away from me. I would do everything in my power to make sure that never happened, but I *am* scared, Bear. Im scared that you would take one look at him and that this would happen, whats happening right now. The look on your face, the way youre standing, ready to swing at me. I should have known that he wouldnt even need to be here to drive you away. And for that, Im sorry. I love you too goddamn much to show you my past, because I dont want to remember a time without you in it. Those three years I spent away, with *him*, were nothing compared to what I have now. But I need you to trust me, Bear. I would never do anything to intentionally hurt you. Im sorry if it feels that way." He went quiet then, tears in his eyes, his gaze directed at the ground. He then moved toward the doorway and was opening the patio door when I grabbed his arm.

"Where are you going?" I whispered hoarsely, flinging his words back at him. "Were you just going to leave?"

"Bear," he said, his voice strained in warning.

"No, Otter," I said, shaking my head. "Its my turn to talk. Look at me. Look at me!" He did. "I dont care what you think or why you do it, but I dont want you talking to him again." He started to interrupt, but I cut him off. "Not because Im jealous or because Im worried that hell take you

away from me, but because of you. Because of what hes doing to *you*. No one should ever have to deal with that. I dont care if you think you made him like that or if you think that he needs this to get over you. You need to stop thinking you make people into *anything* they dont want to be. Hes *angry*, Otter. Hes pissed the hell off, and if you keep talking to him, its only going to continue like that forever. I wont allow that.” My voice dropped down into a growl. “No one will *ever* talk to you like that, not while Im around.” His eyes flashed at this, and I saw a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. “Youre *mine*, you hear me? *Mine*. I swear to Christ if he as much as thinks about coming here, or calling to mess with you again, then he will have to answer to me. Do you understand? Do you understand me, Otter? I fucking *love* you, and no one will ever do that to you again.” I felt hot and sweaty, and his eyes flashed again, and the grin was there, angry and proud, and it was *mine*. It was for *me*. He jumped at me, and I caught him in my arms and crushed him into me, and he cried. He cried into me like I had done into him time and time again, and I rocked him, I swayed him, I whispered to him, “Mine, youre mine,” and he let it all out. By the time he was done, we were both trembling, we were both quaking. My gorge tossed and turned, and I pulled him tighter into me. When finally his sobs subsided, he pulled back and kissed me. I felt his swollen face press against mine, and the ferocity of his kiss made me start to shake again as he pressed me up against the glass, and suddenly we both had too much clothing on, and then it was gone, and we rocked together, and he bit my shoulder as I sucked on his neck, and as I threw my head back and arched into him, I heard him groaning, “Mine, mine, mine,” and I picked it up, and it became a chant until we were both growling and spitting and our cocks were in his hand, and we came at the same time, and I swear to God, the concrete shook and rolled and finally cracked beneath us.

Mine.

T_{HE} next time Jonah called, Otter didnt pick up.

11. Where Bear Is Forced into the Ocean

“I _{do} not!” I growl, looking down at Otter, whos grinning up at me from

his perch on my chest.

He snorts and gently nips my stomach, making me squirm. “Keep telling yourself that,” he says. “All I know is, anytime any part of my mouth is on any part of your body, you make the face.” He shows me it again, rolling his eyes back in his head and opening his mouth, tongue hanging out as he pants. I laugh and smack him upside the head with a pillow.

“Whatever,” I say, grinning at him. “If you think I do that because its a good thing, youre wrong. Thats my bored face. I wish you could do this whole sex thing better. Jesus Christ, Otter, youre the *gay* one here; I would think you would know how to please another guy.”

His eyes sparkle mischievously, and he lowers his lips down to my stomach again, and I think he is going to lick in that one place, and I prepare myself to not make the face (the face being, of course, the slack-jawed, pinnacle of ecstasy that he sends me shooting to) when he presses his lips against my stomach and blows as hard as he can. The farting noise rips through the room, and all my senses explode at once, and before I can stop myself, I shriek like a girl and try to bat him off of me. His arms wrap around me as he holds me down, and I can feel him grinning into my torso as he does it again. Bastard.

Finally he rolls off of me and lies on his back, throwing an arm over his eyes as he sighs contentedly. That lopsided grin that Ive come to yearn for adorns his face. As I stare down at him, Creeds words from weeks before come into my head: *That guy wears his heart on his sleeve*. He couldnt have been more right about that. When Otters upset or down, you can see it in his eyes. When hes happy, its like being on the fucking moon. And when that happiness is directed toward me... well, lets just say I know that Im going to be making the face at some point in the near future. I chuckle softly to

myself.

Otter raises his forearm off his face and raises an eyebrow at me. I shake my head and move to my place on his shoulder. He grunts appreciatively and wraps his arms around me and pulls me in closer.

"That's bullshit, you know," he says, his voice muffled against my hair.

"What is?"

"You've made that face for damn near three months now. You did it the first time, and you've done it since. I *know* what I'm doing."

I roll my eyes and decide to concede. "Yeah, yeah, yeah. Fine, big man. You win this one." I pinch his nipple gently, and he hisses softly and arches into it. "You give mean head."

"Damn right I do," he grumbles, clasp my hand against his chest.

We lay there for a while longer, not speaking, the late-morning August sun pouring in through the window. *Nearly three months*, I think, amused. *Has it really been that long already?* I chide myself playfully, knowing I sound like a thirteen-year-old in his first relationship. These three months have been three months longer than I thought anything like this would last. Since our huge blowup in his backyard, Otter and I have fallen into a wonderful understanding, an understanding that is allowing both of us to look tentatively to the future. I've started looking into what it will take for me to get back into school. A few weeks ago, Otter picked up his camera again and started taking pictures. He even went out and bought the Kid a camera of his own, and those two have been going at it like fiends. The Kid is actually pretty good, much to Otter's chagrin.

It's funny to me, looking back where I was a year ago, compared to where I am now. Everything has changed, almost all of it for the better. For the first time in a very long time, I'm content with not knowing what tomorrow could bring. Granted, I still have the worries that come with being a twentysomething brother/parent, and the questions about who I really am, but those don't seem to be as big a deal as they used to be. It has gotten me thinking lately, that if things can be this good, that if I can be this happy, then why should I have to hide this anymore? Why should this have to be a secret from those that love me most? That's why I've made the decision I have, the decision I have yet to tell Otter. Well, no time like the present.

"Hey," I say.

"Hey, yourself," Otter says back.

"I want to tell Creed." His hand, which up until a second ago had been

playing lazily with my hair, freezes. I feel his chest rise as he takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly. Otter then rolls on his side, laying me gently on the pillow next to him. He puts his forehead against mine and gazes into my eyes, searching for any validity to what Ive just said. I grin shyly at him, and he smiles back, and I can feel his warm breath upon my face.

“You sure?” he asks, his eyes hoping.

I nod slowly. “Ive been thinking about it for a while now. I told myself I needed to tell him about us before he leaves. The party hes throwing is what... nine days away? And he leaves two days after that?” Otter nods. “So that gives me just under two weeks to be able to get my nerve up.”

Otters hand comes up and strokes my cheek softly. “You sure you want to do this, Bear? You know Im not forcing you to do this, right? I want this to be your decision, and I would support you either way.”

“I know,” I tell him, and I do. Otter has been true to his word. And it makes me feel better to know that he realizes that its not just necessarily about us, that its primarily about me. Yes, Otters my boyfriend and Creeds older brother, but Creed is going to have to be faced with the fact that his best friend just happens to like dick. And not just any dick, but the dick belonging to his brother. This conversation could go in so many different directions that Ive found it easier to try and not think about that part.

Otter grins his grin and kisses me on the lips. “Bear McKenna, youve just made my day.”

I smirk at him. “I thought I made your day when I let you fuck me for the last two hours.”

His grin becomes evil, and he rolls back on top of me, deepening his kisses as he rubs his body up and down mine. His lips leave mine, and he kisses my jaw up to my ear, and then his tongue does this little swirl thing, and my toes curl and I groan softly. He chuckles into my ear and does it again. Then his tongue is gone, replaced by his lips that whisper, “God, I hope you know how much I love you.”

“I do,” I gasp as he kisses down my neck.

Much to my annoyance, he stops his trek and stares down at me. “Do you want me to be there when you tell him?”

I think for a moment and then shake my head. “I think it would be better if it were just him and me. I dont know how well this is going to go, and I dont need you there, threatening to kick his ass if he reacts badly.”

“Id murder him if he said anything stupid,” Otter agrees. “But I really dont

think hes going to care all that much. It may very well be the only thing hes pissed off about is not finding this out earlier.”

I nod. “Ive thought of that, and if Im lucky, thats the only thing hell be mad at me for. Thats the only thing that would justify any anger. I still cant help but feel like Im going to be walking into a lions den with this.”

Otter kisses my forehead. “You dont worry about a thing. God forbid if it shouldnt go well, but just remember that he is going to be going back to school in a couple weeks. If he is truly upset about all this, at least you two will have space to be able to work that out. Its probably best that you waited to tell him until now.”

“Yeah?” I ask. “I thought so too. As a matter of fact”—I glance over at the clock on the nightstand—“where is he right now?”

Otters eyes widen slightly. “Now? You want to do it now?”

I shrug. “Might as well, before I chicken out.”

“He said he was going out with someone for lunch and would be back later.”

“Who has he been seeing lately? Do you know?” I ask Otter. Ever since the day when Creed had told me about Jonah and Otter, he had been taking off at random times, saying he was going out or hanging out with friends or going to do something. He never elaborated, never explained himself. When asked, he would grin and change the subject. Creed had never been one to keep secrets, so it was a little disconcerting to me that it seemed that we were both doing it.

Otter shakes his head. “I dont know. He never brings it up to me. I think hes started dating someone here, but Ive never seen anyone come around here or heard him talking to anyone on the phone.”

“This whole thing would be easier for me if he was seeing a guy,” I tell Otter, who laughs. “That way, he cant get pissed off at me for keeping this from him.”

“I highly doubt my little brother is getting done in the ass by some dude,” Otter says, and we both shudder at the thought. That would just be... gross.

“Did he say what time he was going to be back?”

“He said sometime tonight. Do I need to make myself scarce or something?”

I batten down my resolve. Its either now or never. “Could you?” I ask Otter.

“If he gets back in time, maybe you can just go to my house and relieve Mrs. Paquinn of her Kid-watching duties for me. I told her I would be back by seven at the latest.”

“Thatll work. But you better call me if you need anything. I swear to God,

Bear, if Creed starts being stupid, you better let me know.”

I bat my eyes at him. “Why, so you can come rescue me?”

He kisses me again. “Yeah, and so I can shove my foot up his ass.”

I laugh. “My hero,” I say, wrapping my arms around his neck and pulling him back down on top of me.

“Shower?” he says hopefully into my neck. Otter has this weird (and oh so hot) thing about doing it in the shower.

“Shower,” I say happily. I shout as he picks me up with one arm and throws me over his shoulder. Its okay, though. I have a great view of his ass.

Maybe this whole Creed thing wont be as bad as I think.

AN HOUR later, we hop back into his room, dripping wet and furiously spent. I want nothing more than to curl up under the covers with Otter, but the Kid is at home, and I need to find out where Creed is. I yell at Otter when he smacks my bare ass with his hand as I reach down to pull my phone out of my pants. He laughs and lies on his bed on his back, grinning at me and wiggling his eyebrows as he runs his hand slowly up and down his body. My mouth goes dry for a second as my cock tries to twitch into gear, but its a no-go. Six times in four hours is enough to make anybody exhausted, even if the object of their desires is splayed out in front of them, doing their best to get a rise. Otter smirks as I grumble and sit down on the bed next to him, trying to ignore his self-ministrations. I open my phone and am surprised to see five missed calls. No voice mails. I hadnt been able to hear it ring from the shower. I frown as I go to the missed call list and see that the Kid has called me three times and Mrs. Paquinn the other two.

Trying to keep the low-level panic at bay, I show the phone to Otter. He stares at it thoughtfully and reaches over me to the nightstand and grabs his phone. “The Kid called me a few times too,” he says. “And another number I dont recognize.” He reads it off, and it matches Mrs. Paquinns cell phone.

“Why wouldnt they leave any voice mails?” I ask, my voice a little higher than it should be. My hands start to shake slightly, and Otter notices it and grabs them in his hands, rubbing softly.

“Im sure its nothing, Bear,” Otter says gently. “If it was something big, they would have left a message, right?” He takes one of his hands away and reaches to his phone and presses a button and puts it to his ear.

“Who are you calling?” I ask, trying to calm myself down.

“The Kid,” he says, smiling reassuringly at me. “They probably just want to know what time youre getting home.” His smile slides slowly from his

voice as I hear Tys voice mail pick up. “Hmm,” he mutters. He ends the call, then dials another number. “Mrs. Paquinn?” he says after a moment. “Its Otter Thompson. Im fine. How are you?” I motion my hands in front of Otters face, telling him to get to the point. “Did you call my phone earlier? You did? Oh, hes right here. Yes. Is the Kid okay? Im sorry, I meant Ty. Is Tyson alright?” He covers the mouthpiece with his hand and says, “Tys fine, Bear.” I feel a surge of relief wash through me and flop back on the bed. Jesus Christ. Otter goes back to the phone. “Im sorry? Now? Yes, I can tell him. Tell Ty that well be there in a few minutes. Okay, bye.” He clips off the phone and stares down at it thoughtfully.

“What is it?” I ask nervously, a sinking feeling rising up in my stomach again.

“She said....” He pauses and then cocks his head to the side. “She said that you need to get home right away to „help resolve a situation.”

“A situation? What the hell does that mean?” I ask, already shoving my legs into my shorts.

“I dont know, Papa Bear. I guess well see when we get there.”

I groan inwardly. It looks like Im not going to be talking to Creed tonight.

T_{EN} minutes later, we pull up into my apartment complex. Otter parks his Jeep next to mine, where it had been since hed picked me up earlier today. He turns off the Jeep and turns to me and smiles crookedly. I want to smile back, but I cant, but he seems to know this, and its okay with him. He leans over the center console and kisses me quickly, his stubble rough and wonderful against my face. Otter squeezes my hand, and we get out of the car and make our way up the steps and get to the door. I hesitate before sliding the key in the lock. I dont know why, but I suddenly have a very bad feeling about whats on the other side of this door. It seems Ty is okay and nothing appears to be wrong with Mrs. Paquinn, and for the life of me, I cant think of what else this could possibly be about. *Don't ask me*, it says. *I'm just as confused on this as you are*. I feel Otter put his hand on my back, and it gives me a weak burst of courage, and I unlock the door and walk inside.

As soon as were inside, the Kid runs into the hallway and launches himself into my arms. It catches me by surprise and knocks me back gently into Otter. I can feel the Kid trembling, and he puts his face into my chest and his heart beats rapidly against mine. I glance back at Otter, a look of concern marring his handsome face. He reaches from behind me and puts his arms around my waist and brings them up the Kids back and rubs him soothingly.

“Whats going on, Ty?” Otter asks.

Ty pulls back enough for me to see how wide his eyes are. “Shes here,” he whispers.

“Whos here?” I ask, confused and scared. Ty shakes his head and puts himself back into my chest and breathes heavily against me. I havent seen him like this in months.

Otter comes around to my side and puts his arm around me. I look at him, and he smiles back and squeezes my shoulder. I will my feet to start moving and eventually they do, one after another. Its only eight or nine steps to the living room, but its the longest walk of my life. As we turn the corner, I see Mrs. Paquinn sitting rigidly on a chair, facing the couch on the opposite side of the room. She looks at me and theres something in her eyes, something I cant quite place. I think it may be sorrow or fear or any number of things that people think when a bomb is about to be dropped. I honestly still cant see whats so bad. Tys in my arms, breathing and safe (even though hes petrified about *something*), and our apartment hasnt burned down, and Mrs. Paquinn isnt dead. I try to let myself feel some sense of relief. I try, that is, until I hear Otter speak beside me.

“Oh Jesus Christ,” he mutters.

“Hello, Bear,” my mother says.

I think I must be hearing things, because it couldnt be her. I allow myself to be amused for a split second that I would still be able to recognize her voice after all these years. Then I think I must be seeing things as I turn to look at the couch, because what Im seeing couldnt possibly be there. Julie McKenna is sitting on the couch, her back as rigid as Mrs. Paquinns. Her dark hair is shorter now and pulled back into a ponytail. On most, this would give a youthful appearance, but what I am struck by most when I see her for the first time in over three years is how *old* she looks. The crows feet around her eyes divot and scar her face. Her cheeks are puffy, and it looks like shes gained weight. The lumpy dress shes wearing screams sale rack at Kmart, and the shoes are blocky, nondescript. The necklace shes wearing is too shiny to be anything but cheap plastic. She looks beat, weathered, like nothing in her life has ever gone her way. Instinctively, I grip the Kid harder, trying to make him disappear so he never has to see where he came from, only where hes going. My eyes never leave my mothers, and Im almost horrified to see that they are the only thing about her that has not faded, the only thing about her that looks the same. They look the same because they are the brown of my

eyes, the brown of the Kids.

I feel a protective hand on my shoulder and realize its Otter. I tear myself away from my mom for a moment and glance at him. His face is tense, his eyes hard. Hes glaring at my mother and not doing anything to hide it. He feels my eyes on him and turns to me and squeezes my shoulder again, his eyes shifting from anger to hold us, me and Ty, in the same regard he always does. Its almost enough to knock the drowning fear out of me. Almost. His eyes grow cold again as he glances back at my mom. She looks between us nervously and attempts another smile and fails miserably.

Mrs. Paquinn coughs behind me, and I hear her wheeze as she rises from her chair. “Bear, would you walk an old lady to the door?” she says quietly. I nod and kiss the Kids head and hand him over to Otter, whose arms are already waiting. As soon as Ty transfers to him, the Kid curls up against his chest, and Otter leans down and whispers calming words into his ear. His eyes are a contradiction from his words, like soft steel.

Mrs. Paquinn waits for me at the entryway. As I walk up to her, she speaks to Mom: “It was... interesting to see you again, Julie,” she says, her voice flat. “I hope you know that Bear has raised a pretty amazing child.”

My mother nods but doesnt speak.

I follow Mrs. Paquinn out the door and close it gently behind me. She turns to face me, as if expecting my barrage of questions.

“What the hell is she doing here?” I demand. “When did she show up?”

Mrs. Paquinn shudders and leans against the door. “She got here a couple of hours ago,” she says, her voice wavering. “There was a knock at the door, and Ty ran to get it, thinking it was you and that Otter boy. He came back in, just white-faced, and she was following behind him, smiling up a storm. At first I didnt recognize her, but then she opened her mouth, and I knew who she was immediately. Tyson and I both tried to call you.” She says this last part with no accusation in her voice, which makes me love her even more.

“I know, Im sorry. I didnt hear my phone at all.” I shake my head. “What is she doing here, Mrs. Paquinn? Did she say?”

She tilts her head back and closes her eyes. “She didnt say a whole lot, Bear, to be honest. She said that she came back to see how her boys were doing. She kept trying to get Tyson to talk to her, but when that boy wasnt on the phone trying to call you, he was huddled up against me.” She opens her eyes and looks at me. “Whatever shes here for, it cant be good,” she tells me. “No mother takes off for three goddamn years and leaves her children and then

comes back without wanting something.”

“Shit,” I mutter. I can't focus as it seems every thought I've ever had in my life is now racing through my head. My hands are sweaty and my knees feel weak. I want to run inside and get Otter and the Kid and get the hell out of here. Mrs. Paquinns words add to the mess in my head.

She takes my hand in hers and brings it to her dusty lips. “Bear, you need anything, *anything*, you know where I'm at. I may not be all that quick anymore, but I've looked after that boy for a long time now, and I know how to protect those I love.” I take her in my arms, and I hear a soft exhale of surprise, but she welcomes me gladly, her arms stronger than I thought they would be. She lets me go after a time, and without another word, wobbles over to her door and goes inside.

No mother takes off for three goddamn years and leaves her children and then comes back without wanting something.

I go back inside. As soon as I get to the living room, my mother stands expectantly. I see that Otter has taken the Kid out of the room, and I walk past my mom without saying a word and I hear her sigh as she sits back down. Fuck her. She can wait. My guys are not in the kitchen so I head down the hallway and see our bedroom door is shut and the light on. I try the handle, but the door is locked

“Who is it?” Otter asks gruffly.

“It's me,” I say quietly and hear the click of the lock, and the door opens. I look into the room, and the Kid is sitting on his bed, his back pressed against the wall. Otter closes the door and locks it again and pulls me over to the bed, where the Kid is, and gathers both of us in his arms and rocks us gently. He kisses the tops of our heads, and the Kids eyes are still wide and shocked, and I feel the first great wave of anger begin to wash over me. Otter feels me tense under his hands and begins to rub my back.

How the hell can she be here? After ditching her family for some fucking *guy*, how does she have the nerve to even show her face to us again, much less breathe the air in the same *zip code*? Bile rises, hot and bitter, but I'm able to choke it back down where it slides greasily in my stomach. Three years is a long time to let anger and hatred for someone fester, and to be honest, I thought I had gotten over the majority of it. Yes, it sucked horribly when she left, and I was doubting myself and everyone around me and wondering how in Gods name I was going to provide for a child when I was still a child myself. I had days where I alternately cursed her name and then begged God

to make her come home. Over time it dulled into a low ache that I always carried with me but became strangely adept at ignoring.

Now shes back, and its like the sore split open and started oozing all over again. But this time its accompanied by something else, something much darker. I try to focus on it, not completely understanding what it is. The best way I can think to describe it is that Im *offended*, *offended* that shes here, *offended* that she could ever think to show her face again. I dont think Im necessarily upset at the idea of her *actually* being here, but more so the fact that she *thinks* she can just show up like this, out of the blue, like nothing has ever happened. Like the last three fucking years never happened. Like I never came home that one day to find a note from our coward of a mother, saying shes sorry, but that she has to go, that Tom sez she can get a job and that I was always a happy baby and that she had left me \$137.50 out my bank account, \$137.50 of *my* money that was supposed to be for school, but why did I need school to be a writer? Three years of fear, anger, scrimping, sadness, loneliness, three years of feeling lost, like I had been abandoned and forced into a position I was not capable of doing. The bitterness swells within me, and I squeeze my boys tighter.

“We need to call Creed,” Otter says sometime later. “Have him come pick up the Kid.”

I nod. “That sounds good to—”

“No,” the Kid hisses, startling us both. I push away from Otter to get a good look at his face and have to stop myself from pushing him away as hes obviously *livid*. His eyes flash as his mouth twists into a sneer, and its the first time Ive ever seen this expression on him. Anger wells up in me again (did it ever really go away?), and I want nothing more than to knock down the bedroom door and drag her sorry ass out of our house and knock her down the stairs. I want to hear her bones break as she cries out when she lands. I want to break something so very badly, and it might as well be her.

“Ty,” I say, doing nothing to keep the vileness out of my voice. “Ty, I dont want you to be here for this. She has no right to see you.”

“I dont care,” he growls. “Im not leaving with Creed.”

I look to Otter for help. Hes staring down at Ty with an almost matching look of anger. I almost want my mother to walk in right now, to see all of us how we are now, to feel the full brunt of our wrath. I want her to shrink away and leave with her tail between her legs and beg our forgiveness as she walks out of our lives forever. She doesnt deserve to be here. She doesnt deserve to get

to come in and ruin the uneasy stability that we have only just achieved after so long. Its not fair.

“Otter,” I start.

“No, Bear,” he says, almost with the same vehemence as the Kid. “I know what youre going to ask, and my answer is no. Im not going to take the Kid away from here and leave you alone with her.” He looks up at me, and his eyes are hard and blazing, but in more control than either the Kid or myself. “Ive unknowingly spent the last three years wanting you back and now that I have you, Im not going to let you face this by yourself. I love you too much for that.” He pauses, considering. Then he reaches up and squeezes the Kid against him again. “I love you *both* too much for that.”

“You cant make me leave, Bear,” Ty says, his voice like knives. “You cant make *us* leave. I dont want to see her, but Im not going away now, either. You can try, but I bet Otter and I can take you down.”

I grin sickly and my boys do the same. “What did she say to you, Kid?” I ask softly. “What was she talking about before I got here?”

Ty shakes his head. “She kept asking me about school and who my friends are and stuff.” He paws furiously at his eyes, wiping the tears away. “She asked what I wanted to be when I grew up. She asked about you too. A lot. She wanted to know where you worked and who you were hanging out with. She asked how long Otter had been back and if he ever hung out here.”

What the hell is she doing? I think. What game is she trying to play?

Careful, Bear, it whispers. Obviously something’s not right here, so you need to watch yourself.

“Is that all?” I say to the Kid.

He nods. “I didnt answer too much.” He shrugs. “I didnt think it was any of her goddamn business what were doing now. She doesnt get to know.”

Hes right, and I know hes my brother because hes thinking the same exact thing I am. My heart breaks a little then for the Kid, having to face this kind of obstacle at his age. I groan inwardly at the thought of what this is going to do to him in the long run. I silently curse her again, knowing shes unraveling everything weve worked for, everything weve done to finally put ourselves ahead. Pushing her down the stairs suddenly sounds like a good idea again. At least then wed be rid of her for good.

I stand, as ready as Im ever going to be. The weight of the world crashes down on my shoulder again and a wave of dizziness crawls over my eyes, and they blur and flash, and I reach my hand out, to steady myself on

something, anything. Im not too surprised when I feel Otters arm under my shoulder as he moves to embrace me. I hug him fiercely, putting everything I can into it so he knows just how I feel. He seems to understand as he grips me tightly as well, and I feel crushed, in a good way. I want him to keep clutching me, to force out all of the horror thats wringing its way through my body. He pulls away and kisses my forehead and turns to pick up the Kid. Ty rests his head on Otters shoulders, and his arms hang limply at his sides.

“I hope you dont expect me to keep quiet if she pisses you or me off,” Otter says as I reach to unlock the door.

“Me either,” Ty chimes in.

I chuckle bitterly. “I wouldnt expect anything less from my guys,” I tell them, and then I open the door.

Nor I, the voice says as we walk that long walk down the hallway.

As were walking that short ten feet back to the living room, time slows down and almost stops. It has to for me to be able to focus on everything thats on my mind. Oh God, I dont want to remember these things. I dont want to think about them, but I cant stop, and as I take another step toward a fucking cold inevitability, I sink lower and lower into the waves and then and then....

And then—

It’s my fifth birthday and Mom has forgotten and decides to get drunk at ten in the morning with some guy whose name I don’t know. Her eyes are glassy as they run over me, watching me sit at the kitchen table with them, knowing, just knowing that soon she’s going to yell surprise and there will be cake and balloons and presents. She pours herself and Unknown Guy another shot and they toast each other, and then they raise the glasses to me and knock them back and got ready for another. They are both passed out by noon, and I spend the rest of the day in my room, reading to myself and feeling an early tremor.

And then—

I’m eleven now, and begging my mom to let me go to Creed’s house to spend the night again. She’s been cooped up in the apartment for the last three weeks, a strange and scary bout of depression circling over her head. She doesn’t shower, she doesn’t eat. She stays locked in her bedroom and only leaves to buy cigarettes and bourbon before she’s back in her cave. I’m under specific instructions to go to school and then come right home, because, she says, what if she needs me? What if something was to happen to her, and I wasn’t there to help her? Some days, I don’t even get to go to

school. But today, Creed has invited me over to his house because Otter is coming home for a break. "Otters going to be there," I plead with her. "You have to let me go!" She stares at me, and for a moment, I think she's forgotten who I am, and I dare to hope that she has. That shatters as vague recognition encroaches her face, and she shakes her head. "I said no, Der," she tells me. "What if I needed you? Something could happen to me, and you wouldnt be here." She takes another long drag of her smoke that's dangling from her lips. "Something could happen to me," she says again, and I can see that she's gone as she stares out the kitchen window, and I leave the room so I can break down in solitude.

And then—

I'm twelve now and she comes in my room without knocking. I quickly shove the paper I'm writing on and feel my face grow hot. I'm writing a letter to Otter, asking him if when he graduates from college and I graduate from high school, if I could come live with him. It's a letter I know I will never send as there are dozens more just like it hidden underneath my mattress. She looks around the room and finally sits at the edge of the bed and hangs her head down, playing with her hands. "Derrick, weve got a situation here," she says. "I dont know how the hell this happened." I don't answer, hoping she'll take the hint and go away so I can get back to my letter. I'm hoping she'll leave me alone so I can imagine what it would be like to be all grown up and for Otter and me to have our own house, and we could do whatever we wanted and there would be no one to tell us no. She doesn't get it. "Derrick," she sighs, "I think Im pregnant." When she says this, I feel the ceiling come crashing down, and I squint my eyes shut, praying to Whoever will listen to take her away. To make her leave me alone. Or, at the very least, to be utterly and completely wrong about what she just told me. I don't know what to say to her, and seven months later, I have a little brother and all those letters go unsent.

I'm thirteen and I'm Bear from then on.

I'm fifteen, and she leaves for three days without telling me where she's going.

I'm almost seventeen when she mentions someone named Tom.

And then—

I'm about to graduate high school now, and I come home one night from work. There's no one here, and I try not to panic, and that's when I see it, the three-page letter sitting on the table, full of misspelled words and broken

promises. There's a moment, a crystal-clear moment of pure clarity, and it's the closest I have ever been to insanity in my life. I feel myself becoming unhinged and start to break, and the tremors turn into shockwaves, and I clutch the paper in my hands, and the magnitude is like something I've never known. It's brought on by words, words like "I know this is going to be hard for yu to read" and "I have to leave." I slam a picture into the wall, breaking it against my hand and hear, "Tom sez that Ty cant go" and "I am going to leave him here with yu." I bleed, and all I can think of is how she finished it, how she ended it all: "Please dont try looking for me. Mom." I scream.

I'm eight and picking up empty beer cans.

I'm six and fall down, and she won't kiss the scrape because it's gross. I'm nine, and she says she can't go to Parent Night at my school. I'm twelve, and she brings home a baby.

I'm fourteen, and she brings home some guy I've never seen before. I'm seventeen, and she leaves.

Im twenty-one, and she comes back.

WE WALK into the living room, and we see shes moved from the couch to stare at the pictures that I have put up on the wall. Most of them are done by Otter, and they show Anna, Creed, the Kid, and I in various stages of life. Theres some with just one of us, theres some with all of us. But the one shes focused on now gives me pause: its one the Kid had taken a few weeks ago. In it, Otter and I are on the beach, the sun is setting behind us, and Otter has his arm around my shoulder and his face looking directly at the camera, a smile to light up the whole world adorning his face. Im smiling just as big, but my focus is on him. Much is said in my face in that frozen moment, and I get nervous anytime Creed comes over, almost to the point where I want to take it down. But I havent and I wont. She hears us come back into the room and turns to face us.

Otter takes the Kid and sits down on the couch, and the Kid positions himself with his back to Otters chest, his little legs in the middle of Otters big ones. Otter rests his chin on Tys head and pats the couch seat next to him, and I move quickly and assuredly and take my place next to my guys. Mom hesitates for a moment, as if unsure of what to say or do. She moves slowly to and sits in the chair that had recently been occupied by Mrs. Paquinn. She glances between Ty and myself, and I hope she sees how well we are, or at least *were* until she showed up. Otters hand rests comfortably on the couch between his leg and mine, and I can feel his finger, out of sight by the

position of our legs, rub soothingly against my thigh. I glance at him, and he looks back and the gold-green tells me that its going to be okay.

“How are you, Bear?” she finally asks.

“Im fine,” I tell her coldly. “Were fine.”

She nods and look nervously at Otter for a brief moment and then back at me. “Thats good to hear,” she says softly, wringing her hands in her lap. “I figured you would be, but its always good to see it with my own eyes.”

“What do you want?” I ask, feeling unwelcome curiosity mix in with the anger.

She glances at Otter again and then says, “Maybe it would be better if this were just between family,” she says, almost apologetically.

Otter snorts. “Thats not going to happen, Julie. You can say what you need to just as easily with me here.”

“Oliver, I dont think that this concerns you at—” She tries again but is cut off when Otter interrupts.

“What you think isnt really a priority of mine,” he says, scowling at her. “Bear and Tyson both want me here and as long as thats the case, Im not leaving.”

She sighs and looks to me for help, that pleading look on her face that Ive seen countless times before. I feel the skin under my eye twitch involuntarily, and I think wildly that shell imagine Im winking at her. But she doesnt, and I think she knows she wont get any help from me. I want Otter here. I *need* Otter here. That annoying begging look of her dissolves, and were left with the pudgy shy expression thats rested on her face since we got here. But theres something underneath. Something deeper.

“So, Bear,” she says, her voice cracking subtly, “what have you been up to?”

“*What do you want?*” I ask again.

My mother shakes her head. “Cant I just ask you one simple question without you biting my head off? Tyson has already told me all about his school and friends, and I just want to hear how things are with you.”

“No, I didnt,” Ty intones.

“I know you didnt, Kid,” I say, patting him on the leg.

Mom looks offended. “You know,” she says angrily, “regardless of what I did, regardless of how badly I reacted, Im still your mother. I still care about the both of you more than you could ever know.”

“Gee, thanks,” I scoff at her, struggling to keep from shouting. “Thats sure helped me over the past three years when Ive tried to sleep at night.”

Her eyes flash. “It wasn’t easy for me, you know,” she says hotly. “Making that decision was the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do. I’ve regretted it every day since, but the more I tried to figure out how to fix it, the more time passed, and it got harder and harder.”

“You want to talk about how hard it was for you?” I say incredulously. “You want to come here, to *my* house, and spout how difficult life was for *you*? You don’t know anything about hardship!”

“I did what I thought was best!” she cries. “I was in no place to be a good mom to either of you! It was better that I go than stay here and ruin your lives too!”

I feel myself start to shake, and I hear thunder in my ears and lightning arcs its way down my spine. “What you thought was *best*? How could you think what you did would be best? You left your six-year-old son with a seventeen-year-old! In what possible way could that be *best*?”

She shakes her head and tries to rise but sits promptly back down. She wrings her hands, and they’re starting to turn red, and her gaze darts between the three of us. I wonder what she sees now, and know that if I was in her position, I would be quaking in my shoes.

“I was being selfish. I know that now!” she says. “It wasn’t fair to either of you and I... I want you to know that I don’t think I will ever be able to forgive myself.” When she finishes, I see the beginnings of tears in her eyes, but they only prove to make me angrier.

“Is that why you’re here?” I growl. “To seek our forgiveness?”

“I... I don’t know, Bear. I thought that—that if I came back....” She turns her head and brings up a hand to wipe at her eye, and I see her makeup smudge. It makes me want to get up and put my hands around her throat and throttle her until I hear a rattle in her throat as the last breath escapes.

“You shouldn’t be here,” I say. “If you came to see how we were, at least now you know. You’ve got that to appease your fucking conscience.”

“Don’t use that kind of language with me, young man,” she snaps. “I am still your mother, and I will not have you talking to me like that.”

“I don’t think you get to dictate what he does or does not say,” Otter lashes out. “You lost that right a long time ago, Julie, when you took the coward’s way out.”

She turns her irritation to him. “I wasn’t talking to you, Oliver,” she says, annoyed. “Since when do you sit in on family discussions like this, anyways? Don’t you have your own home to go to? Or did you feel like slumming it for

a while?”

“Dont talk to Otter that way!” the Kid suddenly shouts. I barely flinch, but Mom recoils sharply in her seat, and I think shes going to fall over. I look over at Ty and see hes resumed the look of pure fury on his face, and its directed at his mother. “Hes more of my family than you are!”

“Ty, this is a grown-up matter,” she says through gritted teeth. “Why dont you go to your room, and we can talk later.”

“You dont get to tell him what to do,” I shout at her. “You gave that up when you walked away!”

“What else was I supposed to do?” she shouts back. “If Id stayed, everything would have gone to hell, and who knows where wed be now?”

“We would have gotten through it somehow!” I cry. “We always did! It doesnt matter how hard things get, you *never* run out on your fucking family!” I pause, my hands shaking. Both Ty and Otter have their hands on my leg now, and its not lost to me when my moms eyes dart there. “But I tell you what,” I continue. “Maybe youre right. Maybe the best thing for you was to leave. Maybe it was the best thing for all of us. I know I would have hated you even more than I do now for dragging us down with you.”

“I didnt want to,” she whispers, tears flowing freely now. “I couldnt see any other way....”

“Weve established that,” Otter says dryly. “Now why dont you answer Bears question? Why are you here?”

She shoots daggers at him again and looks down at her hands. “I told you: I wanted to see how my sons were doing. I needed to make sure they were okay. Ive been thinking about you two more lately than I have in a long time.” She shudders and pushes on. “I know how that sounds, trust me. I dont mean it to be harsh in any way. But... regardless of how you feel about me right now, you are still my children, and I—I dont know. I think its guilt or its something else, but lately, you guys have been stuck in my head. Theres sometimes I think I see you walking down the street, and I know its not possible, but I still run after you, and, of course, when I get there, its not you at all. It doesnt even look like you.” Otter and I both stare wide-eyed at each other, remembering the story he had told me from his time in San Diego when I haunted him.

“Its weird,” she continues, “but I got it going that I needed to come home and see my sons. I thought that maybe I could learn to be a good mother and that....” She stops and looks up at me, eyes shiny. “Does anything I am

saying make sense?" she asks quietly.

"It does," I concede, refusing to let her know why. "I understand more than you could possibly know." I shake my head as she starts to look hopeful.

"But its too little, too late. Whatever you hoped to accomplish here is done."

"You cant ever forgive me?" she says dully.

"One day, maybe. Now? No. I cant. And you being here has only made it worse. I think it best for all of us if you just leave."

"Ty?" she says meekly, and I hate her for it.

The Kid shakes his head. "I dont want you here. Papa Bear has taken care of me more than you ever did or ever could. Im only nine, and I can see that." He glances over at me, and I smile at him and that gives him courage to continue. "Hes had me to look after for a long time and things are finally starting to be okay. Ive done my best to take care of him, and I think Ive done a good job."

"You have, Kid," I whisper to him, and he smiles.

He glances up at Otter, who kisses his forehead, and he looks back at his mom. "And then Otter came back because he realized that he loved Bear, and Bear loves him, and we dont need anyone telling us how to be a family ever again." He pauses, and then his face goes white.

It probably matches my own.

My moms eyes flash up. She stares at the Kid and then looks between me and Otter and shakes her head. "He what?" she asks quietly. "Its nothing," I say quickly. "You need to go."

When she looks at me next, theres something in her eyes, something I cant quite place. It fills me with dread because the closest thing I can equate it to is *victory*. She looks like she just won something, and my heart freezes in my chest. My skin feels clammy.

"I heard... about *you*," she says to Otter, her voice dripping with obvious disgust. "Before I left, someone told me that they had seen you going into a *fag* bar up in Portland. I didnt believe it. I told them theres no way... no way that youd be like *that*."

"You have no idea what youre talk—" Otter starts, his eyes blazing.

"It doesnt matter," I interrupt. "Whatever he is will never be a concern of yours." I take a deep breath. "Whatever *I* am is no longer your affair. You cant dictate how we live our lives ever again."

"*I am your mother*," she hisses. "I brought you into this world, so that gives me more right than you!" Her mouth twists up in a sneer, but this *is* my

mother; even I can see that underneath she's smiling. "And," she says, her eyes flicking over the Kid, "I'm his mother too. Who do you think people will listen to, Bear? A child like you who's been corrupted, or to a mother who wants nothing more than to see her youngest son raised away from the disgusting lifestyle you seem to have embraced?"

"You need to leave," Otter growls, placing the Kid to the side as if he's getting ready to pounce. "Now. I've had enough of your talk."

She puffs up as much as she can, trying to make herself seem bigger, and for that, I have to give her credit. If I had Otter glowering at me as he is at her, I would have run away and not stopped until I was sure I was in another state. The Kid is squished down between us, but I still feel the way Otter is shaking. It's like his skin is alive, roiling and crawling over his bones. His teeth are bared and there's spit hanging from his lip. The goldgreen is gone, dilated to almost complete blackness. His forehead is scrunched up, and his nose is flaring, and all I want to do is sit back and let him at her. She would deserve it. But I can't let Otter do this. I can't let him fight my battles for me. I also know that if he breaks into this madness that seems to be lapping at his feet, I will quickly follow, and I don't want Ty to see us like that. I make a choice, and it hurts, hurts more than I thought it would. She's been back for a few hours, and it feels like she's already winning.

I reach over and grasp Otter's arm, and his angry face turns to me and for a moment, I get the full brunt of what he has shown my mother. I almost do get up and run, but I find some resolve to push that away, and I'm surprised when I don't even flinch. He breathes heavily for a moment longer, and then his face softens, and his eyes grow brighter, and his lip curls back down, and he comes back to me, and I'm glad. I jerk my head to the left, motioning him to follow. He nods and grabs the Kid's hand, and we rise from the couch. My mother looks to speak, but I shoot her a look, and she subsides. Otter follows Ty, who follows me, and I lead them to the front door. I know my mother is listening intently, hoping to glean anything she can. We go outside, and I close the door behind us.

"Where are we going, Bear?" the Kid asks, his voice small.

I sigh. "We aren't going anywhere, Ty. *You* are going to go with Otter to his house and wait for me there." Both start to protest immediately, but I raise my hand and they fall silent at once. I look at Otter, who looks like he is going to start speaking again at any moment. "You need to get him out of here," I say. "I won't have the Kid listening to whatever hate she is going to

utter. Take him to your house. Get him out of here, Otter. Please,” I say when he starts to protest. “For me.” His shoulders sag, and he wraps an arm around the Kid’s shoulders, which Ty shoves away.

“No, Bear,” the Kid croaks angrily. “We have to do this together. You said we would do this *together*—”

“I know I did,” I say harshly, cutting him off. “But that was before I saw what kind of person she’s become. You don’t need to be here for this, Kid. I don’t *want* you here for this. You have to let me handle it.” His eyes search mine, and he must not like what he sees because his body starts to mimic Otter’s, beaten and dejected.

“Take him home,” I whisper to Otter. “Take him away from here, and I promise I’ll follow you, just as soon as I get rid of her.” Otter nods and starts to pull the Kid toward the stairs, but Ty breaks away and wraps his arms around my waist, his head pressing into my stomach. I lean down and hug him back as hard as I can, trying to make him forget this day. I don’t know how successful I am.

After a minute or so, I relax my grip and am about to turn back inside when he grabs my wrist and pulls me down. His breath is hot and urgent against my ear. “You promise me, Bear,” he breathes into my ear, and I think of the desert. “You promise me that when you come to get me that everything will be the same. *You promise me.*”

I smile sadly. “I promise, Kid. I’ve taken care of you this far, right?” He nods. I lean back up and look at Otter, who looks old, older than I’ve ever seen him. His shoulders are still hunched, and I don’t know if he heard what the Kid has said. I reach out and grasp his hand, and he raises his head, and I see his eyes are filled with angry tears. “Hey, none of that,” I chide, reaching up to lovingly wipe his eyes.

“Ty,” he whispers hoarsely. “Will you go wait for me by the car?” Ty looks between the two of us, and I wonder what he sees. The Kid grabs my free hand and kisses the back of it, and it touches me like I never thought he could. I can feel my breath starting to hitch in my chest and I try to quell it before it can go further. The Kid walks down the stairs and the farther away he gets, the tinier he looks. It’s like he’s growing smaller and smaller and will disappear if I look away.

When Ty is out of earshot, I look back at Otter, who seems to have gathered some resolve and control. I smile at him, and he raises his head again, and I see that the control is a lie. His eyes are black once more, and I start to sweat,

and I think that hes going to burst into the apartment and tear her limb from limb. I start to open my mouth, but the air rushes out of me when Im slammed up against the side of the apartment. Otters body and face press against mine, and his kiss is rough and dangerous. I can feel him clawing against my back and gnashing at my lips. Even with my mother sitting not fifteen feet away, I feel myself grow hard. Otter notices, too, and growls against my face. I reach up and bring my hands to the back of his head, pushing him further into me. He kisses my lips and then nips and licks his way along my jaw until he reaches my neck, and I feel his teeth sink gently into the skin there, and he starts to suck. I lay my head back against the wall as my eyes roll up into my head, and I start to float away on an ocean current. Theres no storm, but Im completely submerged now. Its not as bad as I thought it would be.

Otter finally leans back, and I can feel the gentle burn on my neck where I know hes left his mark. I gaze up at my boyfriend and see the wildness fleeting once again from his eyes, and he puts his forehead against mine. We stand there for what seems like hours, him exhaling while I inhale, and I fill myself up with Otter, with air that was once inside him but now is inside me. I feel a drop fall down on my hand and open my eyes, in time to see another tear fall from his eyes.

“Now shell know,” he grumbles into my face. “Now shell know youre *mine*.” I cup his face in my hands and kiss him gently. “That she will,” I tell him. He suddenly jerks away and shoves his hands into his pockets and makes for the stairs. I put my hand on the doorknob and watch him walk away. When he gets to the bottom, he turns, just like I knew he would. God, I love how Otter is so predictable.

“I love you, Papa Bear,” he calls up to me, his voice steady.

“I know,” I say. “I think Ive always known.”

He nods and then disappears into the dark.

“How long?” Mom sputters, as I walk back into the living room. “How long have you been living in *sin*?”

I snort. “Sin? Come on, Mother.” I sit down on the couch and glare up at her as she paces back and forth in front of me. “Youve never been one for religion, so its probably not a good idea for you to start now. Youll only embarrass yourself more than you already have.”

She stops in front of me, looking incredulous. “Youre worried about me embarrassing myself? Look at you! I didnt raise you to become Otters bitch!”

she yelps at me. “You’re not a *fag*, Bear! What the hell has he done to you?” She starts wringing her hands again, and I think that soon they’ll fall off.

“He hasn’t done anything to me,” I say, frowning. “Well, not anything I didn’t want him to do.” It’s a cheap shot, I know, but I can’t help feeling a sweeping sense of glee as I see her eyes widen, and she pulls back. “And don’t say *fag*. Ty says that word is crude, and I believe him.”

“How long?” she says with a grimace, resuming her trek back and forth in front of me.

“How long what, Mother?”

“How long has he been corrupting you?”

I narrow my eyes. “Get it through your head, right now: he hasn’t done anything to me that I didn’t want him to do.”

“You weren’t like this when I was here!” she wails. “I would have never let you become this... this *thing* that you seem to think you are!”

“Then it’s probably a good thing you left!” I roar at her. “And if you think that you’re staying would have made one goddamned bit of difference, then you’re even more stupid than I thought!”

“Don’t... don’t even...,” she stutters. “Don’t you *dare*....”

I jump to my feet, my face inches from hers. “Dare what?” I sneer, feeling my lip curl up, and I know I look like Otter did just moments ago. Savage pride rolls up through me, starting at my toes and kicking its way up my spine. “Dare what?” I say again, low and hot.

“The bible says—”

“I said drop that bullshit!” I shout at her. “Who the hell are you, coming into my house, telling *me* what’s right and wrong? Just who the hell do you think you are?”

She attempts to pull herself up to her full height, which was never very impressive. “I know who I am,” she shivers at me. “And I know who you are... or who you were. You used to be my son, and now all I see is—is this *queer* standing in front of me.”

When she says this last, it takes all of my strength to keep from reaching out and knocking her across the mouth. Even that is almost not enough. I picture it in my head: my fist would bash into her face and the blood would fly as her mouth breaks, and her nose shatters. She would reel back and trip over the low coffee table that is resting at the back of her legs. She would fall backward, and her head would bounce off the table, and it would crack open, and she would lay there and not move. This shakes me more than her

presence here. It shakes me to know that I could do this and not feel a single ounce of remorse. I close my eyes and try to rid myself of the dizzying sense of vertigo that threatens to take over my mind.

“What do you want?” I say, trying to keep my voice even.

“Ill tell you what I didnt want,” she sniffs. “I didnt want to come home and find this—”

“This isnt your home. Answer the question.”

“Bear,” she cries, her voice high and whining, like I remember it being. “I told you, I just wanted to see my boys!”

“I know thats what you said,” I tell her, my eyes still closed. “But you were lying. What do you want?”

“I dont have to stand here and let you talk to me like this,” she says, and I can feel her step away. “I dont deserve to be treated like this,” she mutters, almost to herself. “I am still your mother, and I know whats right for you.”

My eyes flash open, and Ive had enough. “*WHAT THE FUCK DO YOU WANT!*” I scream, my throat tearing as the words burst out of me. I swim further out to sea. In the distance, the sounds of thunder ripples through the sky, and in my mind I look to the horizon and see enormous thunderheads building. Wind slides gently over my hair, bringing with it the promise of rain. *Bear*, it whispers. *Bear, you need to get to shore. You need to get to shore before the storm gets here. If you don’t, you’ll be pulled out and not even I can follow you there.*

My mother eyes me fearfully, and for the first time in my life, Im glad that she left when she did. Oh, Ive felt some things that could border the relief I feel now, but never in the last three years has this overwhelming sense of rightness been so prevalent in my mind. She said that if she had stayed, Otter and I would never be Otter and me, and as much as Id like to deny it, I have this horrible feeling that shes right. Otter would have stayed here, and I would have gone away to school, and the chances of Otter and me aligning the way we did might never have happened. And to make matters worse, I would have left the Kid here with her. Sure, I would have kicked and berated myself every day for doing so, but I think I would have done it anyway. If she had stayed, so many things would be different, so many things would be out of place in the world. I would have never found the last pieces of the puzzle to fit together to make everything complete. I would have never been able to see the Kid become what he is today. I understand now that I can never truly hate her, because she gave me the ultimate gift: she gave me my

family.

“Mom,” I sigh, the fight draining out of me, “I think you should go. I dont want to do this with you anymore. I think you need to just go and not come back again.”

“Bear,” she says, shuddering, “I cant leave you here like this. Not when I know now that you need your mom the most.” She shakes her head. “I need to be here for you.”

“I dont need you,” I tell her as gently as I can. “I havent needed you for a very long time. You said you came here to see how the Kid and I were doing. You have your answer. You saw it with your own eyes and can go back to where ever it is you came from knowing that we are both doing fine. And we will always be that way.”

She looks like she is going to reach out and grab my shoulders, and for a moment, I think I will let her. I think I will hug her back. I think it will be the last contact that I will probably have with her. If Ty wants to try and find her someday, then thats his choice. This will be the last time I see my mother, and however sad that sounds, its going to be for the best. Ill leave here and go to Otters house, and Ill let my boys wrap me in their arms, and maybe Ill cry a little, but goddammit, I think Ive earned it. Creed will be there, probably already filled in on the goings-on of the McKenna household, and Ill look him in the eye and tell him that I am in love with his brother. Hell look at me funny for a moment and then turn to Otter, who I know will be wearing that lopsided grin of his, and then hell look back at me, and a smile will split his face in half. Hell laugh and shake his head and chide me for not telling him sooner. Ty will tell him thats why he cant say fag anymore, and Creed will walk over and hug the Kid until his back cracks, and then well all go out to the living room and spend the rest of the night talking. Ty will fall asleep on the couch between us, and Creed will carry him up to his room, and Otter will look at me sleepily and hold out his hand. Ill take it, and he will lead me to his room, and Creed will chuckle and tell us that he better not hear anything gross, and well all laugh at that, and Otter will close the door behind me.

The lights will be off but the early gray dawn that can only be found on the Oregon coast will be streaming softly through the window. There will be shadows on the walls that play and dance against Otters skin as I lift his shirt slowly over his head. The neck of the shirt will catch on his nose, and his eyes will be hidden and his arms raised above his head, and Ill lean in and kiss him gently. Ill feel him smile into my mouth and pull his shirt off the rest

of the way. Hell take me into his arms, his biceps flexing and warm and hard against my body. The rest of our clothes will melt away, and when he enters me I know, I just know, the ocean will once again dry up and the clouds will fly away and there will be stars shooting across the sky, and I will cry out against him, and hell groan something back that sounds suspiciously like *I love you*, and Ill know it to be true. The slap of skin against skin will ring throughout my head, and I will be taken to an edge that Ive never been to before, and then well both go over, and well be flying. Afterward, hell play with my hair, and Ill fall asleep in my spot on his shoulder, hearing him say, “The fight for you is all Ive ever known,” and when I dream, it will be of him because *she* gave him to me. *She* gave me the chance to find him, and for that, I will never truly hate her.

I smile at my mother and start to raise my arms.

“Im taking Ty with me,” she says.

“Youre... what?” I say, sure I have heard her wrong.

“Tyson, Bear,” she says. “I am taking Tyson with me. I can see that you are not going to go back to the way you were, the way you *should* be, so I have no choice.”

“You cant,” I whisper.

She eyes me evenly. “I can and I will,” she says stonily. “I am his mother, and he is only eight years old, and he belongs to me.”

“Hes nine, you stupid bitch,” I say. “And you will never take him away from here. This is his home, and Otter and me are his family.”

“You just try and stop me,” she says and pokes me in the chest. “I told you already, Bear. Who do you think people are going to believe? Who are they going to trust? I am his mother and you... you are a disgrace. Youre barely able to take care of yourself, much less a child.”

“Ive done it well enough for the last three years,” I pant, blood pounding in my ears. “Or have you forgotten already? Have you forgotten how you were a coward and left everything behind? You dont think that people are going to ask questions about you?”

She shrugs, and the feeling to hit her comes rising back up. “They can ask all they want, Bear. Ill say I was sick and needed to go away. Or that I had to leave for work and left you in charge. Or any number of things that I can think of. I will not have my son being raised by you. Youre too late for me to save, but it will not happen to Tyson.”

“You would never do that,” I say incredulously. “Youre not that coldhearted,

to do that to him. If you take him away from here, you will destroy him, and I swear on everything I have that I would die before letting you do that.”

She smiles at me, displaying slightly yellowed teeth. “I would be helping him, in the long run. Hell see. Hell hate it at first, but one day, hell understand why I did what I did. Tyson will learn that everything that youve become would have led him down the same path. Hell thank me, and hell love me, because I am his mother.”

I shake my head. “I wont let you do this.”

“You dont have a choice, Bear,” she says. “You should have thought of this before you lowered yourself to the gutter. You could have stopped this from happening. In a way, all of this is your fault.”

“No,” I say, not wanting to believe her. Shes not right. She cant be right. The storm roars deftly overhead, and I think I hear the voice screaming in my head, but I cant make out what its saying, and then its gone, lost in the wind.

“Yes,” she says. “Yes, and now, if you dont mind, call Otter and tell him to bring Tyson back here. If you dont, I will call the police, and we will let them decide.”

“Ill tell them everything youve done,” I say forcefully. “You wont get away with this. You gave me a signed power of attorney over Tyson.”

She arches her eyebrow at me, and it lifts her face, and for a moment, she looks years younger and I see my mom in this woman standing in front of me, and I almost break then, but I see that regardless of who I think she is, shes enjoying pulling the snare, trapping me until I start to choke.

“Wont I?” she says. “At the very least, the police will come, and youll say what you have to say, and Ill say what I have to say, and what do you think will happen then? All you have is an illegally notarized power of attorney that was started before you turned eighteen. Do you think they would let him stay here, Bear? Theyll take one look at you and see youre just a child yourself and that youve sinned against God, and theyll all know what it is youve become. And you can say whatever you want about me. Maybe theyll let him come with me, maybe they wont. If they dont, Bear, theyll still take him away from here and put him somewhere until all of this gets sorted out. How do you think Tyson would do in foster care? Do you think hell be placed with a family who loves him? A family whose moral compass isnt spinning out of control? Hell be taken away from *both* of us, but I can live with that. At least he wont be here. At least he wont be here with you.”

My eyes are wide and my mouth is dry, and I cant think of a single thing to

say to her. *Is that what would happen? I think. Would they really take him away from me? She can't be right about that! She's just saying that to scare me! Nobody, not even her, is that cruel. She knows what that would do to the Kid. Somehow she knows, and I'll be damned if I am going to let this happen.*

"You cant do this," I repeat.

She smiles again and pulls the snare complete. "I can and I will. But...." She pauses, as if considering. "Maybe it wouldnt have to come to that."

"What?" I ask, confused.

Careful, Bear! I hear it scream. *Oh God, don't do this—*

"If you and I can come to an agreement, maybe Ill reconsider," she says, pacing in front of me again. I notice wildly that her tears have completely dried up, and I think that this whole thing has been a game. I think that somehow, shes planned this, down to the last detail. That somehow, shes known about us all along.

"What agreement?" I say dully.

She stops in front of me. "If I leave Ty here with you, you have to promise to do something for me. If you do this one little thing, I promise to stay out of the way. I promise to leave Seafare, and you will never have to see me again."

"What?"

"You will end things with Otter," she says coldly. "This has gone on long enough. I will not have my son become a faggot. I will not have you raise Tyson to be a faggot. You will tell Otter that youve had a change of heart and that you never want to see him again. Tell him to go back to San Diego."

San Diego? How did she know—

"You cant be serious," I whisper.

"Im very serious, Bear," she says. "I know more than you think I do, and I will not have my sons disgrace me like this. If you do this one thing for me, you can keep Ty here with you, and I will stay out of the way. But," she says, shoving her finger into my chest again, "if I leave and hear any different, it will be over, and I will come back here so fast your head will spin. Ty will be taken from you, and I can promise you that you will never see him again."

"Why are you doing this?" I mutter, feeling tears welling inside me.

She shakes her head. "Havent you listened to a single word Ive said? God, Bear, you would think you were still five. I told you: no son of mine is queer. No son of mine will ever be queer. I will not stand for this, ever."

I blink back the stinging in my eyes. "You realize," I tell her weakly, "that Im

going to hate you forever for this.”

Her eyes soften and the wrinkles around her mouth disappear, and for a moment, just a moment, I think all of this is a dream and weve gone back in time, and shes never left, and Ty hasnt been born, and Im six years old, waiting for my mother to say something sweet to me, waiting for her to show me that she cares.

“I can live with that,” she says, smiling. “At least Ill know that Ive saved your soul.”

“Hell fight for me,” I say, knowing its a last resort. “Otter will know something is wrong, and he will fight for me.”

She nods. “He probably will. People like him are soft. Thats why, Bear, you have to make him believe you. Thats why you have to make sure he wont want to fight for you.”

“Hell fight for me,” I mumble.

“Let him, then. You know whats at stake.”

“You cant do this.”

“I am your mother, Bear. I can do anything to you that I want.” “I hate you.”

“Youll get over it in time.”

My head hangs low. “You cant...,” I say, knowing she can. “Whos more important to you?” she says gently. “Who needs you more?”

I look up, staring into the woman who gave me life but taught me nothing about it.

She doesnt flinch away this time. “Do we have a deal?” she asks.

I KNOCK on the door. I can feel the wood under my hands, but I cant hear the sound it makes, because the storm has finally broken open, and the winds are howling in my ears every time I attempt to come up for air. I lower my hand back to my side as another wave crashes over my head and forces me under. Water pours into my nose, and I know Im drowning now. I want to fight to the surface, but I cant. Its so far overhead and would require more effort than my body can expend.

The door opens and Creed is in front of me and saying something, his face twisted. His words are muffled underneath the roaring storm, the beating of the ocean. I walk in and mumble something; what, I dont know. He tries to grab onto my arm, but I shake him off and walk slowly up the stairs. I know he wants to follow me, but he doesnt. I reach Otters door and place my hand on the doorknob. It feels cool under my skin, and thunder rumbles deep in my

head and heart, and I think that if there is to ever be a moment for me to salvage today, that this will be it. All it will take is for me to thrust my head above the water and take a gasp of air. Just one is all it will take. I try to rise, and then a voice in my head repeats my breaking point—

who's more important to you? who needs you more?

—and its not *the* voice, but *her* voice. Something grabs onto my ankle and pulls me further into the depths.

I twist the knob and the latch frees and the door opens. Light from the hallway spills into the darkened room and splays itself onto the bed where Otter and the Kid lay. Otters head is to the side, and he takes long, deep breaths, and I know hes asleep. The Kid rises and falls with every inhalation from his position on Otters chest. The seafloor shifts beneath me, and I know that it will soon break apart and suck me down into it. I walk slowly into the room and shake the Kid gently. His eyes come alert instantly, searching the room wearily until they alight upon me. His smile is cautious, and I know he is testing the waters to see how I am. I summon what strength I have left and smile back, and it must be enough because he relaxes visibly, and I put a finger to my lips, telling him to be quiet. He nods and slowly extricates himself from Otters grasp. Otter shifts subtly in his sleep, and a lock of hair falls onto his forehead, and my heart breaks. The Kid walks to the door and looks back at me. I follow him and shut the door behind me.

Ty grasps my hand, and we walk back down the stairs, where Creed stands, arms crossed, tapping his foot impatiently. He sees us and rolls his eyes. “What the hell is going on?” he growls. “Your *mother*?”

I shrug.

“What the fuck did she want, Bear? Where the fuck has she been?”

“Creed, I need you to do me a favor,” I say. My voice sounds low and rusty, like it hasnt been used in years.

“Anything, Bear. You know that.”

I grip the Kids hand tighter. “I need you to take Ty home for me. Theres something I have to do before I can go.”

I feel the Kid jerk my hand, and I look down at him, and he sees something in my eyes and just like that, he knows. His eyes widen and his bottom lip quivers, and the accusation in his glare is almost more than I can take. “What have you done?” he whispers. “Oh, Bear. What did you *do*?”

“The only thing I could do,” I tell him, and a tear slips from his eye.

“You promised me,” he says angrily. “You promised me that nothing

would change.”

Creed looks back and forth between us, confused. “What? Whats changing? What the hell is going on, Bear? What do you have to do? Your moms still not at your house, is she? Because if she is, I swear to God Im going to kick her fucking ass—”

I shake my head, cutting him off. “Shes gone. Shes gone back to where ever she came from.” I look back down at Ty. “Go with Creed, Kid,” I tell him softly. “Hell take care of you until I get home.”

“*What did you do!*” he shouts, causing Creed to jump back. I dont even blink.

“*What the fuck did you do, Bear!*”

“I did what I had to, Ty,” I say dully. “I did what I had to, to keep you safe. I dont expect you to understand.”

His eyes start to plead as he grabs my hand again. “Whatever it is, we can fix it!” he begs. “Whatever she did, shes gone now! We can make everything right again.”

I shake my head, and his tears start flowing freely now. “Go with Creed, Kid.”

“Bear?” a voice says from the top of the stairs, and the earthquake begins. I feel it roll up through my body and every ledge that Ive ever made, every safe haven that Ive ever constructed breaks apart and blows away. Daggers stab through my eyes, and I turn and see Otter standing at the top of the stairs, his hair sticking up every which way, rubbing the last bit of sleep from his eyes. He smiles down at me but it slowly fades as he sees in me the same thing that the Kid has seen.

“Otter, somethings not right,” the Kid says loudly. “Somethings wrong, and Bear *promised me*—”

“Creed,” I say. “Please take Ty home. Ill be right behind you.”

“*No!*” the Kid yells as Creed picks him up. “No, Creed! You dont understand! You have to stop him! You have to stop Bear!”

Creed looks helplessly at me, and I point toward the door, and the Kid begins to sob. “I hate her!” he cries. “*I hate her!* You cant let her do this, Bear! You cant let her win!” Theres more, a lot more, but its buffeted as Creed closes the door behind them. I hear Otter moving swiftly down the steps, and he peers through the window, looking out into the driveway. Moments later, his body is illuminated as the lights on Creeds car turn on. I hear him reverse out of the driveway, and then its quiet.

“What is going on?” Otter says suddenly, turning to face me. “What the hell

was that all about? What happened with your mom?”

I look over at him, and his face is stony, his eyes suspicious. It pains me further to have him ever look at me this way, but I know its not going to get any better from here. I take a deep breath and open my mouth to speak, to say what it is Ive hastily rehearsed, when it catches in my throat. I gag on it, and molten steel presses against my stomach, and its sharp and blazing, and I think it will tear me apart. I bend over, clutching myself, and I hear Otter rush over to me, and then his arms are around me, and hes rocking me like he always does when the world gets too loud, when the water threatens to rise. He doesnt know now that Im already gone. He doesnt know now that its already too late.

“Its okay, Bear,” he whispers in my ear. “Its going to be okay. Im here, and its going to be okay—”

“No, its not,” I gasp out and push myself forcibly away from him. He reels back and catches his footing just before he falls on his ass. I didnt mean to push him so hard, but I felt him starting to pull me up from the depths. I felt myself starting to rise, and I know that if I breach the surface now, theres going to be no way that I can do this, theres no way that I can carry out this farce. Ty is depending on me now, more than ever, and I cant have Otter pulling me up for air.

“Whats going on, Bear?” he says, his eyes hard again. “What happened to you?”

“I cant be with you anymore,” I say, knowing I cant take them back. I squeeze my eyes shut and try to recapture my breathing, trying to keep it under control. In the darkness, I see the thunderstorm flash brightly above the surface. Lightning shatters its way across the sky, and it looks like a shooting star. Im not so far gone yet to know that its a lie.

He snorts. “What? Like hell, Bear. That was a nice try, though.”

“I cant be with you anymore,” I say again. “Its not who I am.”

“What did she say to you?” he snaps.

“She didnt say anything,” I tell him. “This has nothing to do with her.”

“Like *hell* it doesnt!” he snarls, and I feel a rush of air and think its the wind again, but then I feel Otters breath upon my face, and I know hes standing right in front of me. I dont open my eyes. I cant.

“What did she do, Bear? Its only been a couple of hours! What the fuck did she do to you?”

“Please, Otter,” I whisper.

“Please what?” he says angrily. “I leave you alone with her against my better judgment, and now youre here standing in front of me, not even able to look me in the eye, telling me you dont want to be with me? Of *course* Im going to ask questions. Of *course* Im going to make you explain everything. Youre not getting away that easily. Youre not going to sit there and spout your stupid bullshit!”

My eyes flash open, and for the first time tonight, I am angry with him. Irrationally so, but angry nonetheless. I dont know what I expected to happen, but the way it wells inside me makes me nauseous. I want to lash out and hit and scratch and bite, and as much as I try to tell myself that he has every right to act this way, every right to demand an explanation thats not a flat-out *lie*, I cant help it. Its like all the capillaries have burst behind my eyes because all I see is red.

“Its not stupid!” I shout back, spittle flying from my lips. “Why cant you understand, Otter? I cant do this anymore with you! Its not who I am!”

He doesnt move, doesnt flinch at my raised voice; its like hes turned to stone. “What the fuck you mean its not who you are?” he growls. “Who do you think youre talking to here, Bear? I know you better than anyone in the world. I know when youre lying.”

“We were only kidding ourselves, Otter,” I say, my voice as cold as I can make it. Something inside me shifts then and falls into the chasm that has opened up inside of me, and I dont think Ill ever get it back. “This... this *thing* we had, it was wrong. It was a mistake.”

OTTER! the voice suddenly roars from inside of me. OTTER! DON'T LISTEN TO HIM! HE'S A FRAUD! OH, OTTER! PLEASE HEAR ME! HE'S LYIN—

It ceases as I shove it back into that secret place inside of me.

“A mistake?” Otter says incredulously. “How was it a *mistake*? How can you stand in front of me and say that? What did she do to you, Bear? What does she have on you?”

“Nothing! Shes gone, Otter! Why the hell would I be doing this if she already went away?”

“Fine,” he says turning away from me. “Fine. Lets go.”
“Go? Go where?”

He starts walking up the stairs. “Im changing, and were going to your house. Were going there so I can see for myself that shes gone. And then were calling every goddamned hotel in Seafare to make sure shes not camped

out somewhere. You're lying to me, Bear, and I swear to God I'm going to find out why."

I follow him. "We aren't going anywhere!" I shout after him. "Why can't you get the point, Otter?"

"Because the Bear I know would never do this. The Bear I know wouldn't crap out on something like this. On *me*."

"Then obviously you don't know me as well as you think you do," I say with a scowl, feeling my insides turn to liquid mush. I reach up to try and stop him. My hand grabs hold of his arm, and I'm already thinking of the next line I could feed him, how to cut him where it would hurt the most. I hate her and will hate her for the rest of my life. I feel his arm tense, but I don't have time to prepare even though I know what's coming. I wonder if I could have stopped it even if I did.

"Bear," I hear him say, and his voice is tinged with something that I can't quite place. Then he's whirling around, jerking his arm out of my hands and inadvertently striking my chest in the process. I try to keep myself from falling back, but gravity is a funny thing. It never works when you think about it. I reach for the railing. I reach for him, and I can see his eyes widen as his arms shoot out, but by the time they reach where I was standing, I've already fallen back. I take a moment while I'm suspended in free fall to ponder just how fucked this situation is, and then I try to curl myself up into a ball, but my back hits one of the stairs, and my arms shoot one way, and my legs shoot another, and the breath is knocked out of me as I roll down the stairs. *Carpet!* I think hysterically. *Thank God for carpet!* It's over before I have time to register that it is. I lay on my back and stare up at the ceiling, wondering how it could have come to this.

"Bear?" I hear him whisper, and my eyes find him still standing at the top of the stairs, and I see him shaking in horror. My body goes through a preliminary check list, trying to find the places that hurt, trying to batten down the hatches against the inevitable waves of pain in case something is broken. "Bear?" he says again.

"Oh *God*," I whisper.

Hearing my words seems to have more of an effect on Otter than anything else. One moment he's at the top of the stairs and the next he is by my side, and I allow myself to admire how fast he can move. He sinks to his knees and puts out his hands but stops right before he reaches me. It's almost like he's scared to touch me, like I'll crumble beneath him. "Jesus, Bear," he moans.

“Jesus Christ, are you all right?”

The diagnostic check is done, and I am fairly certain that the only things broken within me are my heart and soul. My body seems to be fine, or at least as fine as a body can be after telling the only person I have ever really loved that its over and then falling down a flight of stairs. This strikes me as funny in some sick, twisted way, but the laughter dies in my throat, and I take in a harsh breath.

“I didnt—I didnt *mean*—” Otter says, his eyes wide and shiny.

“I know,” I mutter. *Do I? Do I really?*

I want to believe I do.

His hands are finally on me, rubbing up and down trying to find where I am broken, trying to find where I bleed. I close my eyes for a moment, against my better judgment, relishing the feeling of his hands on me through the low ache that has already raised its ugly head. His hand reaches my thigh and grazes over it gently, and I inadvertently arch into it, unable to stop myself. I can tell he notices this as his breath catches in his throat and his hand grips harder. Electricity flows underneath his fingertips, and I cant help but groan, and he hears it, and suddenly his hands are all over me, and I feel his lips press against mine, and his mouth is hot and harsh as his tongue pierces my lips. I bring up my hands to wrap them around his neck and pull him down on top of me when I hear *her* warning once again, when I hear her damnable voice in my head, and its like shes right next to me, and I want to scream, but I know that it wont block her out, and it wont keep her away and —

who’s more important to you

—its loud, and it rings throughout my being, and I stop myself from grabbing onto his head. I stop myself from shoving him so deep inside of me that hell never get out because—

i can promise you that you will never see him again

—if I dont, I wont be able to end this, I wont be able to be the one that Tyson needs me to be, and so its there, the question that rapes my head, and it whispers so loudly—

who needs you more

—over and over and over again, and I find my hands on his chest, and I push him away. Oh, how I push him away.

“No,” I say. “No, Otter.”

He falls back on his ass, and I scramble to get away from him. My body

hurts now as I move, and I know Im going to feel like shit tomorrow. I have to keep from crying out as I step down hard on my right ankle and pain flares up, glassy and bright. I dont think its broken, but its definitely twisted something fierce, and I kind of hop and skip away from him, realizing how ridiculous I must look, how ridiculous this whole thing must be. I need to get out of here. I need to leave before something else happens that Ill regret. Nothing can stop me from leaving now.

“Why, Bear?” he says, his voice broken and sad.

Nothing, I guess, except that. I stop. And turn.

“Why?” he says again when I cant bring myself to look at him. “Otter,” I sigh heavily. “I... Ive told you.” A tear fights its way out of

my eye, and I wipe it quickly away before its joined by more. “I dont believe you.”

“Then I dont know what else to say.”

“Say the truth.”

“This is the truth, Otter.” My voice is wavering, and I fight to keep control.

“No, its not. Two hours ago you loved me. Two hours ago, I believed you would do anything for me because you knew I would do anything for you.”

“I do love you, Otter. Just not in the way you want.” For that, I will never forgive myself.

“I dont believe that, either. As a matter of fact, I havent believed a word youve said since you got here tonight.”

“What more do you want me to say?” I ask. *Who needs you more?* “I want the truth, Bear. I think I deserve that, at least. I think that after all weve been through, after everything Ive done to get back to you, Ive earned that right.”

“Go back home, Otter,” I say, wanting to stop but unable to do so as I picture Ty being led away from me, being taken away from me.

“What?”

“Go back to San Diego. Go back and find your life.” I shudder at my words, knowing they are going to haunt me for the rest of my life, knowing this moment will forever be burned into my memory.

“Youre a coward.”

“I know,” I whisper, almost involuntarily.

“Then *why?*” he says, and I hear him climb to his feet. I look up at him and see him take a hesitant step toward me and then another and another. His

eyes are wet and hard, and hes never looked at me like this before, not even when hes been at his angriest. Hes wounded and hes hurt and *I* caused it. *I* made it happen, but I know theres nothing I can do to take it away, to take it back. Ive cut him tonight, and hes bleeding right before me, and I am as hes said: a coward.

“Otter, just let me go,” I mumble. “Just let me go away from here. I cant take this anymore. I cant do this—”

“Ive fought for you,” he says, his voice matching his eyes, and he takes another step. “All my life, Ive fought for you.”

“I know.” I grimace, my stomach knotting up again, my head beginning to ache.

“The fight for you is all Ive ever—”

“Dont say it,” I interrupt. “Dont say that to me.”

Another step.

“Ill say whatever the fuck I want to say to you,” he growls at me. “I love you, and I always have, and I will fight for you. You can say what you want, but I will fight for you again.”

Another step.

“No,” I say, reaching down to find the last shred of resolve I have.

Another step.

“Yes,” he says, and the ocean begins to recede, and the thunder is growing distant, and Im losing it, and I almost dont care. I want him to save me. I want him to keep me from drowning, and I have time to think that maybe this will be okay, that maybe its better if were together because together we can fight her, together we can make sure everything she threatened will never happen. A ray of sunlight pierces the clouds, and I feel myself start to grow warm as Otter takes another step, and I can see his eyes soften ever so slightly, and at this moment, I know I need him more than I have ever needed anybody. He takes the final step, and hes standing in front of me, and I look up into the gold-green, and I think that everything could be okay, that we could do this, that we can make our life in this little corner of the world, and nobody will ever disturb us again, and Ill grow old with him, and I know that its possible. I know that its perfectly logical. I know its *inevitable*, and who am I to deny that, just who the *fuck* am I to fight that? But thats what makes it hurt so much more.

And thats because I know I cant take that risk.

I take a step back, and I dig down deep into the depths, feeling myself choke

on the bitter saltwater as it burns its way down the back of my throat. I feel the murky bottom, and my hands slide into the silt there, and I find buried my last bit of resolve, the last part of me that can look into that goldgreen like it means nothing, like it hasn't changed me forever, like it hasn't shaken me to my core time and time again. But that's the thing about the ocean: it will always be there, no matter what you do.

"This *thing*," I say quietly, "this *obsession* you have with me needs to end."

His eyes flinch as if I raised my fist to his face, and I know I've struck a chord this time, and it hits me, making what I've but no choice to do that much harder. Whether he's wanted to admit it to himself or not, he has obsessed over me, so much so that it blinded him to almost everything else. Part of me has ingrained myself in him, making it near impossible to focus on his own life. I know this, only because he's done the same to me.

The buzzing in my ears grows louder, and I can't help but notice how it sounds so very much like listening to waves in a shell.

"I don't believe you," he says, breaking through the roar, if only for a moment. "You won't walk away from this. You *can't*."

I know he's right and that's when I turn and walk out the door, feeling saltwater bile rising at the back of my throat and over my head.

Otter doesn't follow.

12. Where Bear Drifts Out To Sea

I DONT remember the car ride home.

Ive always heard people say that, and I always thought how stupid it sounded. How can you not remember driving home? You have to start, stop, move one way or another. Cars drive past you, in front of you, and you still cant remember the ride itself until you suddenly find yourself sitting in the parking lot of your shitty apartment, gripping the steering wheel so tight you feel that your fingers might just snap, ignoring the black hole that has suddenly formed in the pit of your stomach, wondering why you just made the biggest mistake of your life but knowing it was all because you are a father now, and fathers have to make the tough decisions, those decisions that no one else can make, if only to protect the ones that have been entrusted to them. How can you not remember?

I FINALLY clear my head (wake up? regain consciousness?) and realize Ive been in the parking lot for a while. The fog outside has seeped its way into the car, and my hands feel chilled, and my neck is stiff. Opening the door, I look at the stairs that lead up to the door where a little boy is waiting for me with hurt in his eyes and venom in his veins. One foot falls in front of the other, and somehow I make it up the steps.

Ive barely inserted the key into the door when it whips open. Creed is staring at me, the Kid curled in his arms. I try to ignore the sight of his little shoulders shaking.

“What the hell is going on?” Creed hisses.

Im bone tired, my brain on auto pilot. I slowly push past Creeds shoulder and close the door behind me. It *snicks* shut, and I dont want it to open ever again. I think its a fine idea to stay here forever, curled up in a ball in the corner, feeling the gentle current wash over me. Floating is always better than hurting.

“I swear to *God*, Bear, if you dont tell me what the hell just happened, Ill—” Creed begins again.

“Youll what?” I say quietly. “What will you do?”

This stops him and his eyes narrow. “What did she do to you? Why the

hell did she come back?"

"I dont want to talk about it."

"Tough shit," he says. "Otter brings the Kid home, and theyre both furious, and all they will tell me is that your *mother* is with you and that shes trying to make amends or something."

I laugh, but theres no humor. "Or something," I agree.

His eyes soften, and for a moment, I am startled to see the green and gold that I never noticed he had. Its duller than Otters, but its there. I look away.

"Bear, what did she do to you?"

"Do you really want to help me right now?"

He nods.

"Then I need you to do me a favor."

"I told you. Anything."

"Go home." I raise my hand before he can retort. "Go home and leave us alone for now. I know that all you want to do is help. I get that. I love you for that. But I need you to be away from me right now." I cant tell him its because he looks way too much like his brother and its annihilating me.

He still looks like hes going to protest, but he sees something in my eyes or hears something in my voice, and his shoulders sag. I raise my arms, and he transfers the Kid to me. Sadness rips through me as I feel my little brother tense at the exchange. I think hes going to struggle but instead, he hooks an arm around my neck and buries his face into my chest. I feel him shake. God. I turn to walk down the hall.

"You have to let me help you," Creed says, and theres desperation in his voice. I look back, Lot and a pillar of salt notwithstanding, and he looks almost as lost as I feel. He says, "I remember the last time this happened, how stubborn you were, how strong you had to be. I remember you, Bear. You two cant do this alone. Please."

"We are alone," I say, and I walk down the hall into the bathroom, shutting the door behind me.

TIME passes. Then:

He shudders in my arms. "She did this, didnt she?" I hear him whisper. I dont know what to say.

"She did this. She did this. She did this! *She did this!*" The last coming out as a small cry, breaking.

I find my voice. "Im sorry, Kid. I did what I had to do to protect you." I dont know if he can hear me because hes still chanting, "She did this, she did

this,” in a low voice, rocking in my arms. Has he always been so small?

“Im sorry. But I have to keep you safe. I have to make sure that no one can take you away from me. Can you see that?” My words are soft, as I know saying them any louder will make them false. “I made a promise to myself the day she left. Through all the anger I had, through all the fear I carried, the guilt, I made a promise. Do you know what I promised, Kid?”

He rocks. *She did this she did this.*

I raise my hands and put them gently to his face, stilling his movements. His eyes fix on mine, and I wonder just how much one kid, no matter even if hes *the* Kid, can take before he cracks. I put my forehead against his.

“Do you know what I promised?” I ask. He shakes his head and a small drop of water falls from his eyelash. “I promised myself that no matter what happened, that no matter where we went, no matter what came our way that you would always be first in my life.”

He groans softly.

“I promised that you were going to go to school, that you would always get whatever you wanted. I promised that I would put everything I had into making you proud of me and making you someone I would always be proud of.”

“But—”

I shake my head. “Quiet.” I kiss his forehead, and his little arms go back around my neck. “I never wanted you to go through what she did to us ever again. I thought that I could be strong enough for the both of us. I wanted to give you what I never had. And—” And I cant continue because the words have become stuck in my throat. His hands clutch at the back of my head, and I feel anger and despair rip through me, and I cling back to him.

“Earthquakes?” he whispers in my ear. “Papa Bear?”

I nod. No one knows me better than he.

He slides his way from my lap and puts his hand in mine and tugs. He

pulls me to the bathtub, and we climb in. He crawls back into my lap and tears start to fall, and we feel the world shaking around us, the ocean at our feet and getting higher. Eventually we drift away, going wherever the current takes us.

You did this, it whispers. I feel it crawl up from the black and flit behind my eyes, sparks shooting in the darkness. *When you get to look back, when the memories and the faces of those involved start to fade, just remember: you did this. At least you will always have that, right? Right? Bear?*

Oh, Bear.

You did this.

SOMEWHERE, a phone rings.

There is a moment of deceptive clarity, those few precious seconds between waking and awake where everything is right, everything is okay, because the slate is clean. The world makes sense because its not a place with hurt and anger. Its just blank, a perfectly imperfect sane insanity. Then logic sets in, synapses fire, muscles spasm, the heart makes itself known as blood vessels and veins constrict and contract, and I remember everything. My eyes are tacky and crass. My throat feels like I swallowed gunpowder, my head the victim of a hangover from alcohol I never drank. I force my eyes open.

Im still in the bathtub. Alone.

The phone rings again, and I hit my head on the soap dish on the wall as I try to move to pull it from my pocket. I cringe, and my finger bends

painfully as its stuck in denim. My ankle is on fire. I curse and yank the phone from my pocket, the ones and zeros of the display saying *Anna. Anna. Anna.* I hit ignore. Its so much nicer to be able to hit ignore rather than having to ignore a ringing phone.

“Tyson?” I rust out. The bathroom is semi-dark, the door propped open slightly, and sunlight spills in through the crack, illuminating a toothbrush. I pull myself up slowly, discovering quickly why people dont spend the night sleeping on porcelain. I open the bathroom door, squinting at the light. It looks like morning. “Kid?” I say, a little louder this time. No response.

I ignore the way my heart picks up speed, skipping here and there. I go down the hall to our bedroom. Empty. Hers too. I check the kitchen. The living room. The balcony. I check the closets, the cabinets. Under the table, over the table. “Tyson?”

My phone rings again. *Anna.*

I run to the front door and open it, stepping out into the cool morning air, and look around wildly. Someone laughs. A truck drives by. Theres a TV playing somewhere close. A siren. A dog barks. A sneeze and a horn. This morning sounds normal. Its a lie. I pound on the door next to mine. Nothing. I pound again.

It opens slightly, Mrs. Paquinns eye peering out. It widens when it sees me, and she opens the door fully. One hand is clutching her robe at the neck. “Bear?”

“Is he here?” I say, shattered. “Is Tyson in there with you? *Kid!*” I shout

past her.

She shakes her head. "Bear, hes not here. I havent seen him since I left him with you last night."

"Hes—hes gone?" I tell her or ask her. I dont know which. "I cant find...."

She steps forward and pulls me into her arms, but I take the path of most resistance and stand rigid in her arms. *This is no time for hugging*, I think. *Hugging time is not now*.

"Dont you worry, dear. Well find him. He cant have gone far." And with that, I cant stand on my own anymore, and I fall forward. Shes tiny, but strong, so much stronger than she looks. I clutch at her, and she pats the back of my head. She smells like an old lady should, dusty flowers and old wrapped butterscotch candies.

I cant help myself as I begin to wonder about this woman. This tiny woman who has been front row for the drama of her next-door neighbors for the past three years. This woman who would seemingly drop everything if I needed her to watch Tyson. Questions rise randomly in my mind, shaming me that I dont know the answers. How did her husband (Gerald? Jonathan?) die? Why doesnt she have kids? Why does she do what she does for me? What in Gods name possesses this woman to stand here in this early morning, holding onto me while I melt down, while the chemical cocktail that is my being gets shaken and stirred? And then, all of thats gone in a flash when my true fear comes to the surface, something I have been scrambling with since I first called out my little brothers name.

"What if *she* took him?" I moan.

She pushes me back and clutches my face in her hands, her eyes fire, her voice frozen steel: "Then we will fight like hell to get him back. No matter what it takes."

My phone rings again. *Anna*. Jesus fucking Christ.

Mrs. Paquinn drops her arms as I connect the call. "Anna, nows not the time," I say harshly. "Tys—"

"Here with me," she interrupts. "Bear, whats going on? He was pounding on my door, and Creeds saying your mom was there?"

"Hes... what?" I look helplessly at Mrs. Paquinn. She steps up and takes the phone from my hand.

"Anna? Its Mrs. Paquinn. Fine, dear, thank you for asking. Tyson? Uhuh. Uh-huh. No, I dont know what thats about. No. No. Just as long as hes safe. Uh-huh. Bear will be fine. He just had a bit of a scare. No, Ill drive

him over. I dont think he should be operating a vehicle at the moment. Okay, now. Bye-bye.” She flips the phone closed and hands it back to me.

“Hes with Anna?” I brilliantly deduce.

She nods. “Apparently he showed up this morning, banging on her door. She has him safe and sound. Now go close your door, and well get you to him.” She reaches back into her apartment and grabs car keys off the little table near the entrance. When she turns back around, she sees I havent moved. “Derrick, now.”

I shut the door, and she takes my hand and pulls me down the stairs. Its so bright outside. I try to gather my senses, try to regain control. *He’s safe*, I tell myself. *He hasn’t been taken. He’s safe*. The bigger questions try to crowd in, like why would he go to Anna, and why had she already known about what had happened from Creed. I cant answer those right now, so I push them away.

“We can take my car,” I mumble as she jerks me around the corner to the parking lot.

She sniffs delicately. “Thats sweet of you, but there is no way I am getting in that death trap of yours. I get upset every time I see you and Tyson get in to go someplace because I know that you are going to be driving home one day, and it will catch on fire.”

I dont think Im right in the head yet because I cant understand what she means. “Fire?”

“Fire,” she agrees. “No, we can take my car. My husband bought me this car shortly before he passed, God love him. We never really had nice things, not that those things are ever really important. But one day he drove home in this big beautiful car with a smile on his face like Id never seen. He told me that, regardless of whatever happened to him, he would go knowing he got to drive me around like a princess.”

“But isnt your car a piece of shi—”

“You hush your mouth, Derrick McKenna! Youre not too old to have it washed out with a bar of soap.” Her eyes flash in my direction, and I see the smile lurking behind the lines of her face.

“Yes, maam.”

We round the last corner and she jingles her keys as we walk up to her early-eighties Caddy. Its built like a brick shithouse and colored to match. She walks over to the passenger side and unlocks the door, opening it and waiting for me to get in. I sigh and try to think if Ive ever driven with her

anywhere. I ignore every story I've ever heard of an old driver barreling through a crowded marketplace. I sit down, a thin cloud of dust springing up around me as my ass bounces in the seat. She slams the door and walks around the front of the car. Her shoulders are almost as high as the hood of the Caddy. I think this maybe is a bad idea, but her threat of soapy waterboarding quells any retort I may have. She gets in the car, and I stare because her head barely clears the steering wheel.

She grins at me and pulls the seat forward, smashing her chest into the horn, which gives an angry gasp. She giggles and reaches down into the door pocket and pulls out sunglasses that cover her entire face. She looks like a 1920s actor in blackface makeup. The car roars to life as I scramble for my seat belt. There isn't one.

"That thing broke years ago," she tells me as she clicks her own belt into place. "I just finally cut it out. But you can be rest assured that whenever Tyson is in this vehicle, he is always safe in the backseat."

I want to get in the backseat.

She smiles again and hits the gas.

MINUTES later I am discovering what it's like to be driven by a woman who thinks the world will end if she doesn't keep the gas pedal firmly against the floor and that apparently there's no such thing as the "Oh My Fuck God" handle bar for me to hang onto in an early-eighties Caddy that's the color of shit.

Mrs. Paquinn glances over at me and must see the blood drained from my face as she says, "Oh, dear, you really must calm down. Haven't I told you that I used to race stock cars as a young woman?"

I feel my shoulders release slightly. "No, I think you must have skipped that part," I say through gritted teeth.

"Well, good. Because I have never raced stock cars, and that would have been a lie."

I try to make myself smaller in the seat, thinking about how after all the shitty things that have happened in the last twenty-four hours, it would be a perfect end if I was splattered all over the windshield.

She turns to look at me as we narrowly miss plowing into a nice family of four.

"Now, am I going to have to pretend to not be nosy or are you going to tell me what happened with Julie?"

I shake my head as my hands tighten onto the seat corners. "Why else would

she be here? To screw everything up like she—*oh my God watch out!*—like she always does,” I finish weakly as she almost rear-ends a stopped car. She goes around it instead, into oncoming traffic, and rounds the next corner at the same speed.

“I can figure that much on my own, Bear. I must admit that I had the darnedest time leaving you boys alone with her last night. I thought it would be okay because you had that Oliver with you. Hes even bigger than my Joseph was, God love him.”

At the mention of *his* name, I forget that we are traveling sixty miles an hour through residential streets. Sadness takes fears place.

“Bear? Honey? Did I say something wrong? That look on your face is breaking my heart.”

I shake my head.

“It wouldnt have anything to do with the way he had you pressed against the wall outside my door last night eating your face, would it?”

Oh shit. My face snaps to hers, and even though I want to beg her to watch the road, I see theres no hatred or disgust in her eyes. Theres only love and its directed at me.

“You werent supposed to see that,” I mutter.

“I didnt see too much,” she assures me. “I heard a bang from outside and looked out my window and saw you two.” She reaches over and pats my lap.

“I must say, though, I never thought I would live to see the day when a *Bear* got mauled.” She chuckles quietly. I smile weakly and think about how

black his eyes had been, how my breath had gotten caught in my throat as I felt his hands upon me, my back pressed against the apartment wall. How his breath had become my own, and how I had just wanted to spit and hiss and rut right there. “I love you,” hed said.

I know . I think I’ve always known.

I shouldnt be thinking of these things. I *can’t* be thinking of— (*Oh God*)

For a moment, I am gone, traveling back days and weeks. I rewind past the earthquake, past the ocean, past the ugliness that was my cowardice, past her. I am with him.

He grins up at me from his spot between my legs, his chest pressing against my cock as he rests his head in one hand and draws meaningless shapes on my stomach with the other. His long legs stretch out and dangle off the edge of the bed.

“Okay, what did I say that time?” he asks.

I shrug. "I don't know. How the hell am I supposed to know what you're spelling. This is stupid."

He rolls his eyes. "It's not stupid. You're stupid. Guess." He starts the shapes again.

I close my eyes, trying to focus on the movement of his finger. He goes slower, and again, I have no idea what he's trying to say. The nerves in my skin tingle as he ghosts his way around and around. His big hands are like fire. I grunt softly and arch, trying to relieve the pressure that is building in my loins. I hear him chuckle softly, and he presses his chest downward.

"What did I say that time?" he whispers as he grinds his chest against me. So unfair.

"You better have been saying how you want my dick in your mouth, or I am going to kick you in the balls," I pant.

"Nope. Let's try it a different way."

He uses his tongue this time. I forget how to spell.

I

go back

further and it's two

It's two days before the dirty spelling bee. I am at work, and the phone rings. Even before I pick it up, I know it's him.

"Hey," he says excitedly. "I totally forgot to tell you today! I didn't buy the dolphin-safe tuna."

I grin. "I love you too," I say, feeling retarded and elated all the same time. I don't even look around to see if anyone is listening.

Then it's

further back and I

and I wake

I wake up next to him, his breath warm on my face, his arms curled around my neck. His heart beats in my ear. I shift gently so I can rest my chin on his nipple, and I look up him, willing him to wake up, wanting to see the gold and green I'd just been dreaming of. And then it's magic, it's magic, it's magic because right then his eyes open, and he smiles sleepily at me. "Hey,"

"Hey, yourself." I reach up, and he's ready for me, hunger beginning to take shape, and I think I won't ever fit against anyone as well as I fit against him.

back further (when? why?)

It's just days after I have told him I love him for the first time. Every time

he sees me, it's like it's for the first time.

"Hey," he says. "You know I knew, right?"

I could pretend not to know what he's talking about, but he won't be fooled.

"I know."

He kisses my forehead. "I felt it from the start."

He tells me he loves me.

He whispers that the fight for me is all he's ever known.

I know. Ah, God how I know and and and

and

then I

go

forward.

We are almost to Annas house.

"That's what this is about, isn't it? About Oliver?" Mrs. Paquinn says quietly.

"What did she say to you, Bear?"

Who's more important to you? Who needs you more? "She said enough." I stare out the window the rest of the way.

WE PULL into the driveway at Annas house. Im about to open the door when Mrs. Paquinn takes me gently by the arm. I look back at her.

"Whatever happened, whatever *will* happen, we'll get through this. Together," she says. "I know you're strong, and I know you're brave, but no one should have to go it alone."

"What about you?" I say stupidly. "You're alone."

She laughs. "Oh, Bear. With you and Tyson and everything else in my life, how could I possibly be alone?"

The front door to the house flies open, and the Kid tears out the door. It seems like I can't get out of the car fast enough. It's not until Im running toward him, it's not until hes jumping into my arms, that I finally realize just how scared Id been. When you're in a rage of panic, it's all-encompassing, terrifying, ice cold. One step removed from it, and I see just how close I was to losing my mind. He sobs in my ear how sorry he is, and I feel his little body pressed to me, and I inhale deeply, taking in his scent, and I know now just how lost I would be without this Kid in my arms. I push him back and wipe clumsily at his face, brushing the tears away. He reaches up and rubs mine away. I capture those tiny hands in mine and press them against my lips and close my eyes. His forehead touches mine.

“Oh, Papa Bear,” he chokes out. “Please dont be mad at me. I just went to get some help. Im just a little guy. I cant take care of you by myself. I didnt mean to make you mad.”

“You take care of me just fine,” I say roughly. “Im not mad. I just got a little scared is all. I thought you were gone.”

This starts him all over again, and he cries into my neck. I grip him tighter, speaking quietly into his ear until he stops sobbing and starts hiccupping. I rub my hand through his hair. Its so long again. He needs a haircut. Ill have to make an appointment. My hands start to shake. I dont know why.

I look over his shoulder and see Anna standing next to Mrs. Paquinn, both of their eyes red-rimmed, their faces wet. And of course, next to Anna is Creed, eyes suspiciously shiny. He rubs his forearm over his face, and when he drops it, his eyes have lost the shine. Whats there instead is resolve. He knows. And if he knows, Anna does too.

Fuck.

I feel a tugging on my chin and look down at the Kid in my arms. His nose is snotty and his face is puffy, but hes still the greatest thing Ive ever seen. And if he can know about me and Otter and still look at me like I created the Earth, then I must be doing something right.

I sigh and turn my attention back to my little family standing in front of me. “I guess we have some things to talk about. Can we go inside?”

13. Where Bear Comes (Out) Clean

WE SIT in Annas living room, Tyson in my lap and the others sitting across from us on the couch. The Kid seems perfectly happy being latched tightly onto my hands, and I have to admit Im pretty okay with that. I look over at the others, and theyre watching me silently, and in my head, Im making it a game to see how long we can go before someone breaks the silence like its something fragile. The sweat thats pouring down my back leaves no doubt in my mind that its going to be me. I feel a tug on my chin.

The Kid looks up at me with those big eyes of his. He motions for me to lean in closer, and he puts his lips close to my ear, and his breath tickles as he speaks: “I didnt say anything to them.” The look he gives me is so miserable that I hug him tightly again.

“I know you didnt, Kid.” And I do.

“Are you really going to tell them?” he whispers. “Does that mean we can go see Otter when were done?”

I smile sadly down at him. “I dont know.” I take a deep breath. “Im scared.” His brow furrows, and he looks over at Anna, Creed, and Mrs. Paquinn. He appears to study them for a moment and then turns back to me. “Why?”

Why indeed?

Fully knowing the answer, yet still needing to hear it anyway, I ask, “After I told you, you still loved me, right?”

The smile that dawns on his face then is dazzling, and I can see more tears welling up behind his eyes. He wraps his arms around my neck and squeezes like well both die if he doesnt hug me as hard as he can. His breath is harsh in my ear. “More than youll ever know, Papa Bear. More than youll ever know.” I close my eyes and focus on his heart beating next to mine. He is my strength. He is my courage. If he tells me that its going to be okay, I at least have to take the chance and believe him.

“I can have both of you, cant I?” I whisper to him. “I dont have to choose?”

He rubs his hands along the back of my head. “You dont have to choose,” he says quietly. “We chose you already.”

My voice startles me, as I dont know Im about to speak to the group before me until I hear my words come out loud and strong, rushed and firm: “Before I say anything, theres one thing I would ask. One thing I need to have you all

do.” I don’t take my eyes off the Kid, but I somehow know I have their attention. “Don’t say anything until I’m done. Let me say what it is I need to say without any interruptions. It’s... it’s the only thing I ask.” I finally look at them.

Mrs. Paquinn and Anna are nodding, but Creed looks like he thinks that’s the stupidest idea in the world. He starts to open his mouth, and Anna elbows him in the ribs, causing him to wince and glare down at her. A moment later, I’m the center of his attention again, and he nods, resigned. *I hope you’ll still be willing to look at me when I’m done*, I think. *I hope you all will*.

Wanting to delay the inevitable as long as I can, I open my mouth to tell them about our mom’s visit or to wax poetic about how much they all mean to me and that I hope what I am about to say won’t change anything. But, as I’ve told you before, my mouth tends to cheat and start the race early, leaving my brain—whose legs have apparently been amputated—trying to catch up. So the words come out, and I should have realized what I was going to say. Maybe it means something. Maybe it means nothing. Who the hell knows anymore?

My immortal words? “Creed, I’m in love with your brother, and I think I fucked everything up.”

Boom.

Okay, well, nothing explodes. As a matter of fact, you know the expression *so quiet, you could have heard a pin drop*? Well, it was so quiet you could have heard a molecule fart three states away. Apparently no noise is needed to have three sets of eyes bulge out of their sockets. Scratch that, four sets. I look down at the Kid, and his eyes are just as wide. He snickers and says, “Wow, just straight for the jugular, huh?” He pauses and then snickers again. “No pun intended. Well, maybe just a little.” I smack him gently upside the head. Story of my life: lousy execution with color commentary by the world’s smallest vegetarian. This isn’t going to go well.

True to their word, the others don’t speak. Mrs. Paquinn has a smile on her face. Anna is unreadable. Creed... well, Creed’s face is red enough that it looks like he is going to shit an early-eighties Caddy. I look back down at the Kid, and he is smiling quietly, still clutching my finger. If anyone else saw his expression, they would think he’s just listening, waiting for me to continue. But I feel the rigidness of his little body, the way the smile doesn’t quite reach his eyes as he stares at our family. I know him: he’s waiting for someone to say anything against me so that he can tear them limb from limb.

Whether or not hes capable doesnt matter. I know now that this isnt just for me. He needs this as much as I do.

“Im in love with your brother,” I say again, stronger, faster. “He loves me, too, though I havent done anything to deserve it. I did almost everything I could to make sure it didnt happen. As a matter of fact, Im surprised he hasnt run screaming back to California before now.” That takes root in my head. *Oh, God.* I look at Creed. “Has he?” I whisper, not really wanting an answer, but wanting it to be no all at the same time.

He shakes his head but doesnt speak.

“Oh,” I say weakly. The Kid lets me have a moment of relief before motioning for me to continue. I decide not to think anymore and let the words come on their own. Its easier that way, not having to choke through a saltwater and silt filter. Its easier than drowning.

And it goes a little something like this:

One day, a very long time ago, I came home and found a letter from our mom that said she was leaving. I was angry and sad and scared all at the same time. I didn’t know that it was possible to feel that much emotion all at the same time. I thought I was going to die. I thought I was going insane. I thought about doing what she did, and packing up and leaving a note and disappearing because any of those would have been easier than what was expected of me to do. I think most people wouldn’t have blamed me for taking the coward’s way out. But there would have been a few who would’ve had a big fucking problem with that. Those were the few people who stood beside me, allowed me to have my moments to break when the earthquakes got too strong. Those were the few people who were there to put me back together again when I thought I was too broken to fix. They wouldn’t let me get too maudlin, wouldn’t let me curl up in myself and never come back out, even though I wanted to. They saw through all my wannabe hard-ass stubborn bullshit and knew what was best for me. What was best for the Kid.

I don’t know if I’ve ever told you all thank you. I mean, I’ve probably said it before, but you all don’t know how much it meant to us. To know that through the hell that was our lives, there was always one of you there. It’s hard for me to admit when I need help, but you know me to know when I need what I can’t ask for. So thank you, for being our family. Thank you for being the people I want to have in my life. And I ask that you forgive me for the lies I’ve told when I know I’m a better person than that.

You see, there was part of me that was missing. I couldn’t have told you

exactly what it was, but it was there. I didn't recognize it for what it was and let it scab over, but it never completely healed. It never cleared away. It never scarred. Now that I know what it is, it makes this all the more harder because I tore that scab off and cut it open again, rubbing salt on it for good measure. I'm scared that I will never be able to have what I want because of what will get taken from me. I'm prepared to go my whole life to protect what's mine, but I don't know how to ask for it back without losing my heart. He's what was missing. He came back and I was complete. It took a while to figure that out, and there were times when I thought I never would; but I did, and he was there, waiting for me. So I went with it, going someplace I didn't think possible. You all have kept me sane, but he kept me safe. I don't say this to hurt any of you, because it's not my intention. I just want to be honest with you from now on. I have to, to keep us sane, to keep us safe. Because I learned that maybe, just maybe, I could have something too.

I've lied to myself and to all of you. The only thing that I can ask, that I can beg for, is that you see that it was never my intention to hurt any of you, to drive any of you away. I've said and done things that I am not proud of, but I think I've learned that I can't keep us away from the world anymore. I need to be able to have a place to call home, and I think I know now that if he's not there, it will never be home again.

Maybe I could have gone about this a different way. I probably should have. But when your hand is forced and retrospect is a brutal bitch, I guess I don't really know what I was so scared of. I'll understand if you hate me, and I'll hope that one day you can see past that. I don't expect everything to be like it was, because I know nothing will ever be the same, and I won't waste time pretending it will be. I need this. I need him. The fight for him is all I've ever known, and it's not a fight I am willing to lose. Not anymore.

Mrs. Paquinn, you've been there to make sure the Kid and I didn't fall. I may not fully understand why, but you gave selflessly, and I will never forget it. I think I can speak for both of us when I say we love you.

Creed, you are my brother. I know I would have lost my way without you. Your first thoughts have always been to make sure Ty and I would never want for anything, even when I was too stupid to ask for it. We love you.

Anna, I don't know how hard this is for you to be here, but please believe me when I say that I never planned for it to happen. I did feel for you, and I think part of me always will. You are and always will be my sanity. We love you.

Tyson, I may be your brother, but I can guarantee there isn't a father out

there who is more proud of what's his than I am. You kept me honest. You kept me alive. And believe me when I say that you can take care of me because you have done so your whole life. I love you.

And as for him? Oh God. It always comes back to him, and I think it always will. But I made a mistake, one that I don't know how to fix.

I need help. I've fucked everything up, and I need help.

I stop, my voice hoarse. My vision blurs and my chest burns. The room seems so much brighter than when I started, and I can't catch my breath. At some point during what had to be the most saccharine and trite speech I've ever given, the Kid had wrapped himself around me again and now holds me tight. I hug him back, wanting to close my eyes against him but forcing myself to look at the three opposite of me.

It seems like I made everyone cry again. Goddammit. After today, I am putting an embargo on this gooey feelings shit. Mrs. Paquinn sniffs and smiles warmly at us. Anna is frowning through her tears, and when she catches my eye, she looks away. Creed suddenly stands and moves toward us, practically running. He bends over, and I see the green and gold, faded but there. There's a person missing from all of this, I know. He should be here.

"Can I talk now?" Creed asks, voice low.

I nod.

He leans over to the Kid and rubs his hair. "I'm sorry, Ty, for those hurtful words I said. I won't ever say stuff like that again. I see now why you got so mad at me, but that's still no excuse. You deserve a better uncle than I am, but if you will let me, I will make sure that I *am* better from now on." The Kid turns and launches himself from my lap and into Creed's waiting arms. He spins the Kid around and around and around. He whispers something into his ear, something I can't hear, but I know it's just for them. He pulls back and sets the Kid on his feet. "Can you go sit by Anna for a minute? There's something I need to say to Papa Bear." The Kid narrows his eyes, only for a moment, and then looks back at me. I nod, and he turns to Anna's open arms.

"Stand up, Bear," Creed orders, his voice hard.

I do.

"I'm pissed off at you," he growls.

Oh shit.

"How the hell could you have not told me this?" I start to sputter, but he snaps his head side to side. "That question was rhetorical and don't even think of answering it with rhetoric. You had your turn to talk. Now it's my turn.

You can talk when Im finished. Clear?”

I nod again.

He smacks me upside the head. “I am your fucking *brother*, you stupid idiot! How dare you not tell me how you felt about him, about everything that was going on? I thought you at least respected me enough to tell me the goddamn truth!”

“But—”

“Bear!” he barks. “I said no talking!” I go to sit back down, but he grabs me by the arm, and since he outweighs me by a good thirty pounds, moving ceases to be an option. His grip is hard enough to bruise.

“But maybe, just *maybe*, I can see where youre coming from, even though I think its bullshit. Maybe, just *maybe*, I can forgive you for breaking my brothers heart because God knows youre breaking mine. Why didnt you just tell me? Did you think I would hate you? That I would be disgusted by you? If I ever gave you that idea, then Im fucking sorry.” His voice breaks at that last bit, and I cant help but be an asshole and think, *Oh Jesus, embargo on crying! Embargo all around!*

He surprises me then by crushing me into him, knocking the breath out of me, knocking my world off its axis. Just a moment ago, I was planning our escape from Creeds wrath, but now I dont know what to do. I dont know that is, until he whispers in my ear.

“Youre my brother, you big queen. I will love you no matter what you do, who you do, or where you do it. Do we have a clear understanding?” He sniffs noisily.

I nod as best I can, as my face is crushed against his chest. All I want to do is stay there for a while and—wait a minute. What the hell did he say? “Youll love me no matter *where* I do it?”

He pulls back and grins. “Well, I dont know what youre into now that you like cock. I bet youre into some pretty weird shit.” His eyes narrow. “Stay out of my room,” he warns.

I swallow past the lump in my throat. “Um. About that.”

“Bear! You better be fucking kidding me!” He punches me in the arm. Hard.

“Bastard,” I snarl and punch him back.

He sidesteps and winks and is about to turn when I see a shadow cross his eyes. He turns back to me. “What the hell does he have that I dont?”

I choke, wishing the ground would open up and swallow this idiot. “Youre kidding, right?”

He shakes his head. "Maybe that's what I'll decide to be pissed about now. You think that old man is hotter than I am?"

"That's... gross, Creed. That's really fucking gross."

"Ow. Thanks for the ego boost. Do you like ABBA now?"

"How do you even know who they are? Aside from the fact that you love them so much?"

"Am I going to have to go shopping with you and talk about my feelings?"

"I've seen the way you dress. It couldn't hurt."

He grins evilly and steps forward leaning over to whisper in my ear. "You're totally the bottom, aren't you? I bet you love it."

"The first time we did anything, it was me fucking your brother," I whisper back.

The color drains from his face, and I know I've won. He pats my shoulder and tells me how nice for both of us. He looks serious again when he says, "Is it strong?"

My head snaps up and down, just once.

He grunts thoughtfully as only he can, and with that, I know that all the fears I've had about him are unfounded. I can't help but feel like an ass for not having enough faith and trust in Creed. I lose myself for a moment, thinking about a time when we were eleven, maybe twelve. It was just the two of us, walking along the beach, the wind whipping around, picking up sand and flinging it back in our faces. He had looked at me and said—

He looks at me and says he's always wanted to have a little brother. I punch him in the arm and remind him that I am older than he is. He smiles and nods and says, "You know what I mean."

And I do. I've felt the same since I could remember. It's tough being an only child, but this isn't a thought I share, because it's no longer true. I pick up a rock and skip it out over the waves, watching it bounce.

He says, "We're probably going to have to be friends forever now. You know that, right?"

I laugh, only because I know it's true. Later, when he pricks his finger, blood blossoms as he waits for me to do the same. It's childish, it's lame, and we both know it. But that doesn't stop us from pushing the tips of our fingers together, mixing DNA and secrets into something that only we can understand.

He whispers, "Now it's really forever." His eyes gleam. "It's strong." And it's like getting smacked in the face with the sun.

“Creed?” I ask as he walks back to the couch, a look of satisfaction on his face. “Can... can this be fixed?” I dont dare to elaborate, because speaking of it aloud would show how fragile it really is. I close my eyes and wait for his answer.

“Is it strong?” he asks again gruffly. I dont know how, but I know hes remembering the same things I am.

“It is,” I mumble.

“Then its never too late to fix it. Ill say one thing about it, and I swear youll never hear me speak of it again: you destroyed him, Bear.”

My head hangs.

“When he told me, you know, about everything, the only other thing I remember besides being shocked to hell and back is the look on his face. He didnt want to tell me what was wrong at first, but it didnt take me long to figure it out.” He sighs. “Hes broken, Bear, and I dont know what its going to take to fix it. But if its strong, if what youve said today is true, then you know as well as I do that it *has* to be fixed. If it cant be... well, I dont know. The last twenty-four hours have shown how little I really do know.” He says this last without any anger in his voice. “You mind telling us what the hell happened? It was your mom, wasnt it?”

And then it spills out of me, her vitriol, her threats to take away whats mine, the look of victory in her eyes when she knew she had me cornered and that I wasnt going to fight my way out. My voice is flat, hollow. Theres no anger, no sadness. Im reciting events that could have happened to someone else. Its the only way that I can get through it. I get to the part where the Kid is played as a pawn, and I think my voice will catch. I think it will stutter and stop, but I push through. Reliving it again, detached. As I look back at my words and actions from last night, I hate myself for being so weak, hate myself for falling into her trap. I wish I could believe her threats are empty, but I cant. The small part of me that dreams of the ocean reminds me how easy it would be for her to come back, how easy it would be for her take the Kid away. It swells in me and is once again threatening to take over. I still dont know if I am strong enough to push it away, to kill it. I had told Creed that it was strong, what I feel for his brother, and that wasnt a lie. Its just one side of the war that I am trying to win.

You just walked out on him , it whispers. You sat there and lied to his face and then walked out. What makes you think he will even give you the time of day? You heard Creed: he’s broken, and you broke him. You were strong

enough to do that at least, weren't you?

Ah, sweet words, caressing.

I ^{FINISH} the story, the last story I think I want to tell for a while. All I want to do is go home and lay down for a week and worry about everything when I wake up. But I know I can't, because he will be there when I close my eyes, laughing, grinning, dancing.

I ache.

"What changed, then?" Creed asks. "What makes you want him back now as opposed to the dick move you made last night?"

I try to smile, but I think it comes out more as a grimace. I had been expecting this question ever since I opened my mouth with a request to help me fix the mess I'd made. I'm almost amused that there never seemed to be any question of wanting to get him back, that I most likely should have avoided this whole mess to begin with. The question now arises as to whether or not Otter will take all leave of his senses and even be able to be in the same room as me. But this is beside the point. I've hesitated too long and the others are staring at me, waiting for an answer. I try to find the words to say, to express how it means to feel love-smacked, lust-infused, heart like shattered glass. I need them to understand that I am not complete without him. But I think I've already said as much as I could on the matter. Maybe I should let Otter say something.

I grab my wallet from my back pocket and pull out the letter that I've kept secreted away for twenty months. I don't need to read it again. I already have it memorized.

I know you were hurt and have every reason to be angry, but just know that there hasn't been a day that has gone by that I haven't thought about you and Ty. Maybe that's my punishment, knowing you are doing well and knowing I had nothing to do with it. For what it's worth, I'm proud of you, for having done so great despite people breaking their promises to you.

It was good to see you, even if it was only for a moment. I am glad I got at least that. I've missed you, Papa Bear.

Anna grabs it first. I'd almost forgotten she was even here. It only takes her a moment to read through the words, her face tightening slightly as she reads. She thrusts it to Mrs. Paquinn, who handles the worn paper more gingerly. Anna looks back at me, her mouth set. "When?" she asks. "When did he send this to you?"

For a moment, I almost think of lying. But I don't. "He left it on my car the

Christmas before last when he came home.”

She nods and looks away.

Mrs. Paquinn sniffs. “It sounded like he was saying good-bye.”

Creed finishes and hands it off to the Kid. “It sounded like he was trying to apologize for leaving,” Creed says.

The Kid then speaks up: “No,” he says, looking up from the page. He folds it gently and hands it back to me. He waits until I have put it in its rightful place, and then he says softly: “Its a love letter. Hes telling Bear he loves him without even saying the words.” The Kid again has seen what most of us could not. I should no longer be surprised when he provides the insight that none of the rest of us have.

“Even then?” Creed asks. “It goes all the way back that far?”

And then Anna stands. Her body is rigid, her fists clenched, eyes wet and angry. I dont think I have seen her like this before, not even when we broke up. Shes enraged, and I know its my fault. Ive made so many goddamn mistakes. Ive been selfish. Ive been a liar, and Anna has been the one hit over the head the most with this. Id been expecting the worst, and it looks like Im about to get it. Its as much as I deserve.

“You stupid bastard!” she cries out. I flinch only slightly when she runs at me and starts beating her hands against my chest. I raise my hands to defend myself, but Creed has already pulled her away, and I see with some sick amusement that the Kid has pushed himself between me and her and is trying to guard me with his little body. “How *dare* you!” she shrieks and tries to break from Creeds hold. “You motherfucker!” She turns into Creeds shoulder and sobs. The Kid is tense before me. I reach down and put my hand on his shoulder, wishing it didnt have to be this way.

A few minutes later, Anna regains some composure as Creed whispers in her ear and turns to me again, but he has ahold of her and isnt letting her near me. I think maybe its best to let her have her say and have it done with, but, of course, thats not the way it works out.

“Anna,” the Kid says, jaw clenched. “Bear made mistakes. He already said he did. You have every right to be angry, but if you hit him again, I swear to God I will hit you back. I dont care if youre a girl and bigger than me. If you touch him, itll be the last thing you ever do.”

You want to know what it feels like to be castrated? Trying having your nine-year-old brother protect you from your ex-girlfriend after youve told her youre in love with a man.

We all stare down at the Kid, whose face is white with anger. Anna turns, and I think she is going to walk out, and I won't blame her if she does. But she surprises me when she stops. For a moment, I feel the silence is going to crush us all. Then: "Did you ever really care about me at all?"

Creed shakes his head, and his shoulders sag. He looks like he wants to apologize to me for her, but I cut him off with a wave of my hand. It's unrealistic to have expected her to have the same reaction as Creed. She had more to lose, and I can blame no one but myself.

"Of course I did," I say truthfully. "You have to believe me when I say that. I still do."

She spins around, eyes flashing. "I don't know *what* to believe from you anymore. I gave you so many opportunities, so many chances to just tell me the truth."

I cock my head at her. "You knew, didn't you?" It's out before I can stop myself.

Her hair flips angrily as she nods. "I knew... something. I didn't want to believe it. But you can't be as close as you and I were without seeing it. How you were around *him*. How, even when you were at your angriest, there was still something in your voice when you talked about *him*. I told myself I was just seeing things, that I was just—"

"Projecting?" I say, not able to keep my fool mouth shut.

She laughs, but there's no humor in it. "You bastard," she says again. "Why didn't you just tell me?"

"I was scared."

"Of me?"

I shake my head. "No. Of everything else. I didn't know who I was, much less what the fuck I was doing. I thought that was pretty obvious by now."

She frowns at me, cheeks wet. God, she's so fucking beautiful.

"And now?" she asks.

Yes, Bear, it asks. What now? She's right, you know. She's given you so many openings. And here she is doing it again. I believe this will be the last time, so you might as well go out with a bang, don't you think?

"I love him, Anna. It's not meant to hurt you, and it doesn't make what I feel for you any less important. I was wrong with so many things, but I at least know I love him. It's the only thing I have left." I look down at the floor.

"I loved you," she sniffs. "I don't know if I can ever get over this."

"Will you try?" It's unfair to ask, but as this conversation has pointed out, I'm

kind of a selfish jerk. "I dont know if I can do this without you."

"You said that to me once. Do you remember? And you seem to have gotten along just fine without me." The anger rises again in her voice. "How soon was it, anyways?"

"What?" I know what shes asking, and I attempt to stall.

"That you fucked him. How soon was it after we broke up?" Her eyes narrow. "Or were we still together?" she scowls through gritted teeth.

"Does it matter?"

"Yes."

"Right after."

"I hope it was worth it," she snarls.

I look her in the eye. "It was."

She nods, arms crossed. "Finally some fucking honesty from you. I told you that you broke my heart. Do you remember? Do you remember what I said after that?"

I do.

"I told you that you may have broken my heart, but that it was mine to give."

"I know."

As long as I live, I will never understand women. She jumps at me again, and the Kid raises his fists, and I really think hes going to punch her

in the boob, but he squawks as he is trapped between us as she wraps her arms around my neck. I had forgotten what it feels like to hold her there, to feel her against me. While it doesnt do what it did before, there is something still there, something that releases and breaks open. We cry into each others hair, and I think it will be okay if we enacted the embargo tomorrow.

After a while, she quiets down. She hiccups and leans in, her lips brushing against my ear. "Is it?" she asks. "What you said to Creed? Is it strong?"

I nod, not trusting myself to speak.

She laughs miserably. "You never pick the easy road, do you?" "Not my style," I whisper back.

She leans back, and our faces are close as our eyes search each others.

"I dont know if Ill get over this," she says again. "But I hope youll give me the time to try."

"I mean what I said, Anna. I love you."

"I know, Bear. And maybe one day, that will be enough." She drops her arms and walks back to the couch. Mrs. Paquinn reaches up and pulls her

down into a hug.

“Give her time, man,” Creed whispers, eyes begging. “Shell come around. Just dont... dont give up on her.”

“I wont,” I say. How can I? Shes family.

“So what now? You gonna go fix this now? With him?” he asks. “I cant.” Now the room explodes.

“*What the fuck are you talking about?*” screams Creed.

“*Are you kidding me?*” screams the Kid.

“*Are you retarded?*” screams Anna.

“*Aahhhhhhhhhhh!*” screams Mrs. Paquinn.

Jesus Christ. “I will!” I shout over them. “Fuck, let me talk!” They all shut up, at least having the decency to blush.

I take a breath. “I cant, not until the Kid is safe. Not until I have a plan, something to make sure our mom cant take him away from me. Thats what this whole fucking thing is about.”

“No, Bear,” the Kid drawls. “This was your coming-out party. Dont put me in the middle of it.”

“You little shit,” I growl as I pick him up and press him against me again. I feel better knowing hes near.

“Seriously, how the hell are we going to do that?” Creed asks. I dont make mention of his saying *we*, because if Ive learned anything today, its that these decisions are no longer mine alone to make. Whatever is decided affects all of us. I wont make that mistake again.

“Bear? If I may,” Mrs. Paquinn says. “Havent you thought about getting custody of Tyson?”

“How?” I say stupidly.

“Legally,” she says, barely restraining the eye roll. “Havent you ever talked to a lawyer about this?”

“I dont know any lawyers,” I say, as if this explains everything,

“Well, I do. I used to do paralegal work for a law office, you know.”

“Well, isnt that just convenient,” Creed mutters.

I ignore him. “This isnt like the time you raced stock cars, is it?” She smiles beautifully at me. “I never raced stock cars, Bear.” “Exactly.”

“Exactly,” she agrees. “Dont you think a lawyer who practices in family law would at least be able to give you options?”

“I have the power of attorney,” I say.

She shakes her head. “Its not the same. The power of attorney is something

that can be easily contested. Full custody is not.”

“I cant afford that,” I say quickly, already knowing whats coming next.

“Dont worry about that,” Creed says.

“Creed—”

“Bear? What am I?”

I sigh. “My brother.”

He cocks an eyebrow.

“My big brother.”

“Damn right. And what do my parents have in abundance?” “A tolerance for someone like you?”

He glares at me.

I sigh again. “Disposable income.”

“And who just made a big speech about family and love and other gay things?”

Goddammit. “Me.”

“So I am going to e-mail my parents right now, while Mrs. Paquinn makes a few phone calls, and we are going to get this solved. And then you are going to crawl on your hands and knees and pray that Otter has taken all leave of his senses and take you back.”

“I...”

“You what?”

I look down at the ground. “What if he doesnt take me back?” “Would you blame him?” Creed asks curiously.

I shake my head. “Im scared,” I say again. I look up at him.

His eyes soften, and he wraps me in his arms again. “I am too. But if we dont take a chance, then whats the point of all of this?” Im okay until he kisses my cheek.

Surrounded by my family, for better or worse, I break.

Hopefully for the last time.

14. Where Bear Makes Like Moses and Parts the Sea

So I came out (as what, I don't quite know yet). I still believe what I said to Otter, that you can't be gay for one person, but I am questioning it more and more these days as the idea of anyone but him starts the cold sweats all over again. I don't know what the fuck I am anymore. I can talk a good game, but apparently my obsession with him can take over quicker than anything I've ever known. As much as I'd like to think I'm in control, I know I'm just along for the ride.

And where has this ride taken me? I'm frantically tearing through the streets in my car on the night of Creeds going-away party after receiving a phone call from him saying Otter was leaving, and I needed to get there *now*. I break every Oregon driving law, knowing if a cop tries to pull me over, I'll most likely end up on the eleven o'clock news after leading police on a 90-mph chase through the residential streets of Seafare. But, somehow, somehow, I make it.

There are too many cars surrounding the house, so, naturally, I jump the curb and land in the front yard, barely remembering to put my car into park, but not bothering to turn it off as I race inside. The music is loud and there are people everywhere. Drinks are flowing, and people call out my name in surprise because I wasn't supposed to be here. I'd decided not to come. I run up the stairs, knocking people down, forgetting to apologize because it doesn't really matter, only *he* matters right now, and I think I'll pause as I stand before his door—the sign proclaiming *Otter's Room* nothing more than a ghost that only I can see—but I don't stop at all. I slam into the door and it flies open, startling the two men inside. Otter looks up from his position leaning against his old desk, the look on his face full of something, something I can't quite make out. His eyes widen as they rest on me, and the gold and green flash brightly. I want to tell him to stay, that I've started to fix everything and that I am so very, very sorry and won't he please love me again because I can't imagine my life without him by my side. And that's when I register the other man. The dark, handsome stranger who walks toward me, a guarded smile on his face as he raises his hand to shake mine, saying, “You must be Bear. I'm

Jonah, Olivers boyfriend.”

What the fu—

So, ^{HOW} does this happen? How do I end up shaking the hand of a man I hate even though Ive never met him?

Well.

Creed promised me he wouldnt say anything to Otter until this whole Kid situation was resolved. I told him it was because I wanted to make sure that everything would be fixed. But he knew as well as I did that it was because I didnt want to take the chance of hurting us all over again. It was hard for him, too, because now that the secret was out, Creed seemed way too gung ho about Otter and I being together.

“I can’t believe how I never saw it before,” he said. “You guys are perfect for each other. You’ll be able to put up with each other’s bullshit and leave me out of it.”

“Gee, you sure know how to make a guy feel good,” I replied, groaning as soon as the words were out of my mouth.

He grinned wickedly at me. “No, that’s apparently your job now.” His smile faded and his eyes grew thoughtful. “Seriously, though, does it hurt? You know, butt sex? I’ve always wondered—”

I fled the room.

I tried not to ask him too much about Otter, because what he would say was destroying my resolve. He said Otter barely came out of his room, and when he did, he looked like he hadnt slept at all and would only speak in grunts. Creed didnt know what Otter did in his room all day, but I could imagine, and thats why I tried to force the thought of him to the back of my head. He was there, floating in the waves, mixed in with the rest of the white noise. I needed to make things right again. For all of us. But I couldnt do that if Otter was the only thing to occupy my thoughts. So he went to the back, constant but quiet.

The Kid understood my motives, but he didnt agree with the way I was going about it. “Why dont you just tell him?” he said to me more than once. “At least he would know that there was something to look forward to, something worth fighting for.” Trying to deny the logic of the smartest nineyear-old in the world made the separation all that much more difficult. I didnt know how to put my actions into words, to explain to them that I would rather die than see Otter look at me the way he did the last time I faced him. Cowardly? Maybe. Unfair? Possibly. Selfish? Undoubtedly. But in my head, I knew that

I was preparing to give myself to him for as long as he would have me (whether or not this plan would work, and whether or not he'd take me back often mixed in—I've learned that I'm probably certifiable with the number of voices I have in my head).

It didn't help that I dreamt of him every night.

It didn't help that those dreams were so terrifying, so heartrending. It didn't help that I usually woke with my dick harder than it's ever been, forced to take matters into my own hand. I would be hunched over in the bathroom, my body howling at the familiarity of my hand, begging for it to be *his* strong calloused grip, that pull that was more experienced than I would ever be. Those nights, coming was painful, as if it came from a much deeper place than where humanly possible. I would be spent, staring at my reflection, wondering where those lines around my mouth came from, why my red-rimmed eyes never seemed to fade back to normal. This had to work. It had to.

Mrs. Paquinn lived up to her word and made an appointment for me to meet Erica Sharp, a lawyer with the impressively named firm of Weiss, Goldstein, and Eddington. I told Mrs. Paquinn I had never seen any of their commercials. She told me she was so happy I was on my way to joining the real world. I think she meant it as an insult, but I can't quite figure out how. She called in a few favors, and a few days later, I had an appointment with an attorney in Portland.

On the day of, I sat in front of the mirror, trying to fix my tie, which seemed to somehow be inside out. I was listening for a knock at the door that would signal Mrs. Paquinn for Kid-watching duties when I heard a sigh.

"I don't know why I can't come with you. I mean, you're trying to adopt *me*. Don't you think they're going to want to hear what I have to say?"

"I told you," I muttered, wondering how the skinny end of the tie turned out longer than the fat end, "I am just going up there to feel her out. I need to make sure she can help us before we decide to do anything." The stupid tie was obviously broken.

He sighed again and came to stand in front of me, pushing me back so I sat on the bed. His hands batted mine away, and I lifted my chin, looking in the mirror and wondering if I should have gotten a haircut. Or shaved the wannabe facial hair that grew sparsely over my face.

"It'll be fine. I mean, you're wearing a tie and everything, right?" he said, the smile evident in his voice. "Are you going to be okay when you have to flirt

with her?”

I cocked an eyebrow down at him. “Flirt with her? Why the hell would I have to do that?” *Maybe I should change my shirt*, I thought.

“Well, I was trying to research this whole situation,” he said, looping something over something else, “so I figured I may as well watch TV to do it, since the last time I turned on the computer, there was a picture of a guy wearing a jock strap and holding a soccer ball as our screen saver.” *Goddammit, Creed*. “Which, by the way, you should probably get rid of that, seeing as how you are trying to get custody of a nine-year-old boy. I don’t think that would fly too well with the courts.”

I choked down whatever thought was about to burst from my lips. I noticed the Kid was still talking, oblivious to the slow fire spreading up my neck. “I mean, why would anyone wear something like that? Jockstraps look gross, and do you really think he would have been playing soccer without any pants on?”

“Uh, Kid, I think it may be a good idea if this topic was never brought up again, especially if we happened to be visited by a social worker for this whole thing. I don’t think they would appreciate the subtle nuances of your line of questioning.”

He jerked the knot of the tie up to my neck, cutting off the rest of my reprimand. “Don’t make fun of me, Derrick,” he scolded. I felt properly rebuked.

“The lawyer?” I reminded him

He stepped back to check his work. I looked in the mirror and saw that the tie was perfect. How the hell he knew things like that was completely beyond me. “Right,” he said. “The lawyer. Well, since your porn was on our computer, and I thought I was probably already scarred for life, I figured watching some lawyer show would help me pick up on the law.”

“And?” I asked, heading to the bathroom to brush my teeth. He followed. “Well, I found one show, and the lawyer was this pretty lady. Well, actually, all the ladies were pretty, which I felt was an unrealistic depiction of the workplace. All the women at your work aren’t babes, so I think something gets lost in translation with what are obviously misguided TV producers.” I grunted my response through a mouthful of Crest.

“Anyways, all the ladies at the law firm had trouble with their love lives, and this one guy was trying to convince the *really* pretty lawyer to take his case pro bono. Which, in case you don’t know, means—”

"I bnoe fut it smeans," I said, gagging on the toothbrush.

"Well, he started flirting with her, saying he could make the case worth her while, and then she took off her shirt, and he took off his pants, and then she decided to represent him. Because he had a good case and nice assets."

I stared at his reflection. "What lawyer show was this?"

He shrugged. "It pre-empted *Dateline*. The point is, you may need to flirt with the lawyer. Society wants you to help a lawyers self-esteem." He was almost finished with the last sentence when his façade cracked and a grin spilled out over his face.

"You little shit," I howled at him, and he ran screaming from the room, with me close on his heels.

"The neighbors arent going to make good character witnesses if they hear you abusing a child!" he shouted over his shoulder. He stopped after rounding the kitchen table in the kitchen, putting it between us.

"I think the neighbors will let this one slide," I smirked, feinting left but going right. He fell for it, and I snagged his arm and spun him upside down, his feet pointed in my face, his arms dangling, his face red.

"Put me down, you overgrown ape!" he screamed at me. "This isnt how someone wearing a *tie* should act!"

"It is if the person wearing it has an annoying little brother who thinks hes so damn funny!" I yelled back, holding both his legs with the crook of my arm as I reached down to tickle his exposed stomach.

"Oh, real civilized!" he huffed out between screams of laughter. "Im sure youll knock em dead for sure. Should I pack my bag now for when they come to take me away?"

This stopped me cold. Every fear put into one short sentence, uttered in the laughter of a child.

I set him down carefully, putting his feet on the ground, and knelt before him. He was still giggling quietly to himself, tears streaming down his scarlet face. I reached up and brushed the hair from his forehead. "You know Ill never let that happen, right?" I murmured.

He smiled and it was beautiful. He jumped into my arms and said simply, "I know."

There was a knock at the door.

"You may want to answer that," he said, letting me go.

I went to the door, expecting Mrs. Paquinn, but not expecting Anna and Creed. So of course, all three were there. "We all set to go?" Creed asked, a

grin on his face.

“We?”

He pushed his way inside, knocking me back, making room for Anna and Mrs. Paquinn, all of whom were doing an excellent job of ignoring my flaring nostrils and that vein pulsing out of my forehead.

“Well, yeah,” he said succinctly. “You did realize that you werent going by yourself, right? Dont be stupid, Bear.”

“Yeah, dont be stupid,” echoed Anna and Mrs. Paquinn.

“Yeah, dont be—”

“Kid, dont you dare say another word,” I snapped. I turned back to the others.

“I made it very clear that I was going *by myself*. I told you this all specifically. Was there something that didnt quite sink in with those words?”

Mrs. Paquinn rolled her eyes. “Dont be daft, dear. Wasnt it you that said those lovely things about us being family and some such? I remember being moved to tears because of it. Didnt you, Anna?”

Anna nodded and looked me in the eyes. “Of course, Mrs. Paquinn. And he told us how much he loved us and that he needed our help. Right, Kid?”

Oh so now she wants to help me, I thought darkly.

“Right,” the Kid said, and I wondered if this whole thing was scripted, because it sounded a little too perfect. “And since, really, its all about me, I think I should have a say in who goes.”

“And?” Creed asked.

“We all go,” he said, grinning.

“And Creed said I get to drive!” Mrs. Paquinn cackled.

“Did you know she used to race stock cars?” Creed asked.

She beamed.

“Y_{OUVE} got quite a cheering section, dont you?” Ms. Erica Sharp of

Weiss, Goldstein, and Eddington said to me, looking over my shoulder at the Kid, Anna, Creed, *and* Mrs. Paquinn, all seated behind me in her spacious office.

I grimaced. “You could say that.” I neglected to tell her that when the secretary called my name and motioned for me to Ericas office, the others had all stood like *their* damn names had been called too.

I knew they were all smiling like idiots at the back of my head. Erica

shuffled through some papers on her desk. “Well, after speaking with you on the phone and doing some background checks to verify employment, residence, and the like, Ive got to tell you, Derrick—” “Bear,” the Kid said from behind me.

She arched an eyebrow. “Excuse me?”

I pulled on my tie. It was choking the life out of me.

“His real name is Derrick, but everyone calls him Bear,” the Kid explained, having all the time in the world.

Erica nodded. “Well, then, *Bear*, Ive got to tell you that I think I can help you. You said youve been watching him for how long now?”

“Uh, the last three years.”

“And your mother is... gone?” Her voice raised slightly on the last word.

“She took off to parts unknown,” I said, as if that would explain everything.

“Uh-huh, I see. Do you know where?”

I shook my head. I felt them all doing the same behind me.

She pressed a button on her phone. “Josh?”

“Yes, Miz Sharp?”

“I need you to have a skip-trace run on a”—she looked down at her notes —“a Julie McKenna. M-C-K-E-N-N-A. Bear, what is her date of birth?”

I told her, and she informed the Josh in the machine.

“And Tysons father?” she asked me.

“His father was never in the picture. Why are you asking for my moms birthday? Whats a skip trace?”

She leaned forward. “Well, your mother will need to be found and notified of these proceedings.”

“What!” I exploded. How the fuck dare she! I started to stand, planning on taking the Kid by the hand and storming out, when I felt four different sets of hands on my shoulders, holding me down. That only made me angrier. “You cant bring her back!” I hissed. “Shell do everything she can to fuck this up!”

Erica eyed me evenly. No doubt shes used to people yelling at her. After all, she is a lawyer. “Technically, she is still his mother and listed guardian. From what youve told me, the power of attorney you have was not correctly handled, especially since it deals with a minor. We are required to notify her, to give her an opportunity to respond. The same with his father if he was still a part of Tysons life. But if what you say is true, and if she has been gone for the last three years without a social visit, a phone call, or a dime, then I think she will have no ground to stand on.”

I groaned. "Damn."

"Something I should know, Derrick?"

"His name is Bear," all four voices chorused behind me.

"Uh, shit." I rubbed my hands over my face. "She came back suddenly, a few days ago. And, uh."

"And what?"

"She just showed up out of nowhere!" Anna snapped.

"Like she hadn't been gone at all," Creed growled.

"It was really quite a nightmare," Mrs. Paquinn said, sniffing.

"And she threatened him!" the Kid exclaimed.

I wondered if Miz Erica Sharp of Weiss, Goldstein, and Eddington had a gun in her desk that she would have been willing to let me borrow it so I could put myself out of my misery.

"Threatened?" Erica asked, the smile in her voice gone.

"Uh, yeah. You could say that."

She leaned forward again and frowned. "Bear, she either did or she didn't. What did she threaten you with?"

I was silent. I didn't know what I was going to say to this person who, till roughly twenty minutes before, had been a complete stranger. It took me months to tell the closest people in my life, and I had to just spill it out to this woman who was looking at me like I was some new species of bug? I was silent. Silent, that is, until the Kid got up from his seat and walked around my chair, pushing my arms out of my lap, and crawled up onto me and leaned in to whisper, "Papa Bear. I need you to do this. *Otter* needs you to do this."

I dare you to try and fight those sweet, sweet words.

I looked over the Kid's shoulder at Erica as I wrapped my arms around him. Her eyes softened, and she watched us closely. "She threatened to take the Kid away if I didn't break up with my boyfriend."

"And what did you do?" Erica asked, her voice flat.

I squeezed my eyes shut. "I broke up with my boyfriend."

"I see. And how did your boyfriend react to all of this?"

"I, uh. I didn't tell him it was because of her."

She snorted. "I take it that it didn't go well?"

"That's an understatement," Creed muttered.

"You'll have to forgive Creed," Mrs. Paquinn said. "Bear's boyfriend is his brother."

Erica stared at us. "I see."

“And Anna is Bears ex-girlfriend,” Creed said.

“And Creed is Bears best friend,” Anna explained.

“And Im Mrs. Paquinn,” Mrs. Paquinn exclaimed triumphantly.

“This is for Otter as much as it is for me,” the Kid said.

“Otter?” Erica asked.

“Bears boyfriend, Creeds brother,” Mrs. Paquinn said patiently.

“Bear and Otter?” Erica asked. To her credit, she didnt look confused at all.

“Bear and Otter,” everyone agreed.

“And why is this for him as much as for Tyson?”

“Because Bears got it in his head that he cant get Otter back until the Kid is safe,” Creed said.

“And Bear, ever the idiot, shouldnt have even broken up with him in the first place. At least not without explaining what was really going on,” Anna said. Then she added, “I should know. We broke up because he couldnt tell me he was in love with Otter.”

“We did not,” I growled. “We broke up because I lied to you.”

“About being in love with Otter,” Anna, Creed, Mrs. Paquinn, and the Kid all said.

“This situations not as complicated as it sounds,” I said to Erica, who was still staring.

The Kid laughed. “No, its a lot worse. Bear and Otter are meant to be together, but Bear wont do anything about it until he makes sure that our mom wont take me away.”

“Which is why were here now,” Mrs. Paquinn finished.

We all looked expectantly at Miz Sharp.

“So let me get this straight,” she said, to which of course Creed and the Kid started snickering. I glared at both of them and saw that Mrs. Paquinn was giggling too. “Not only are you trying to get custody of your little brother, but this whole thing will decide whether or not you get back together with someone you obviously love, but who you lied to when you broke up with him, *and* you have the complete support of his brother, your ex-girlfriend, and your little brother, whom you are trying to gain legal custody of?”

“And Mrs. Paquinn,” said Mrs. Paquinn, to which we all agreed.

“That sounds about right,” I said to Erica.

“And were you dating Otter before your mother left?”

I shook my head. “This is kind of a recent thing.”

The peanut gallery chuckled, but no one spoke.

Erica frowned and rubbed her hands together. "So you're saying you recently started dating Otter, and your mother all of a sudden comes out of nowhere and tells you to break up with him? How did she know about your relationship?"

Tell him to go back to San Diego, she'd said to me. I remembered feeling a chill go down my spine at her words. But with everything that had happened after, I'd forgotten. How had she known all of this? "I don't know," I told Erica, hearing a high-pitched whine buzzing in my ears.

"And she said all she wanted was for you to break up with Otter, and then she left?"

I nodded, realizing only then how stupid that sounded.

Erica sighed, seemingly realizing that as well. "Well, it sounds like she's up to something, but I don't want to speculate. For all we know, she *could* have come back to do exactly what she did, to break you and your boyfriend up, maybe trying to assert that she still had some control of your life. Maybe she hired a private investigator to check into you and Otter. Have you seen anyone around lately that you haven't seen before?"

I shook my head, and she looked beyond me to the audience. I turned, and they were all shaking their heads as well. I tried not to show anything on my face, but Erica's words bothered me greatly. Why had Mom come back? What did she want? Was there someone following us around? That creeped me out more than the unknown plans of my mother. She might not have necessarily known when she came that Otter and I were together, but his presence at our house and his protection over the Kid and me could have spelled it out for her, even if the Kid hadn't said anything.

Erica shrugged. "I'm sure this will all come out in the open shortly. There already seems to be a few questions I'd like to ask your mother if I get the opportunity."

Her and me both.

She looked me in the eye. "*If* this works, and *if* you get custody of Tyson, are you going to stick by them? Tyson and Otter?"

"I have to," I said quietly. "They're all I have."

She surprised us all by laughing. She stood and reached out to take my hand, jostling the Kid around in my arms. "Well, Derrick and Tyson, I will be happy to represent you. I'll warn you now: this is going to be a tough road to travel, and there are going to be some hard decisions to be made. Your lives will be scrutinized like never before and will be for a long time to come.

Your mother may have motives that we dont yet know about. And Bear, your sexuality will most likely be brought up as well, but I believe that we have a fighting chance with this. And whats better is that *you* believe it. Now, I need you to fill out a whole shitload of paperwork, and I will explain what it means to be considered a *guardian ad litem* and when we can expect to get into court.” She stopped for a moment, and looked down at us. “Are you ready to do this?”

The Kid smiled up at me. I felt the strong support at my back.

How in Gods name could I say no?

“W^{HAT} do you mean youre not coming?” Creed yelled over the phone. “This partys going to be huge!”

It was three days after our meeting with the lawyer, and I had been dreading this very phone call ever since I decided I wouldnt be going to Creeds party. I didnt want the first time I saw Otter again to be in the middle of a hundred drunken college kids. I told Creed as much.

He sighed. “You could come over early and talk to him. I still dont know why youre prolonging this any further.” He paused, then said, “Youre not thinking about backing out, are you?”

“No!” I snapped. “How the fuck could you even ask me that? Have you not been paying attention for the last four days?”

“I have been,” he retorted. “All I seem to remember is *Otter* this, and *Otter* that. „I love Otter so much that I say things and make all my friends cry.”

“Its not my fault youre emotionally sensitive,” I grumbled at him. “Ass,” he said fondly. “Well, then, when? Youre not going to wait the entire time it takes for this custody thing to go through, are you?” “I considered it,” I admitted. “But Erica said it can take months, and I cant wait that long. Its not fair to him.”

“So, then just come over now and tell him before the damn party!”

I could, I thought. *It would be so easy for me to hop in my car and drive over to the house and let this whole stupid thing be put behind us, and then we can fuck and laugh and cry, and he can tell me he loves me, and then we will go downstairs and get drunk and then go back upstairs again, and I will show him just how sorry I really am.*

It was a seductive thought, really. But I never would have gotten to be where I was (both good *and* bad) if I hadnt been as stubborn as Ive proven myself to be. I wanted to be honest with Creed and tell him that the real

reason was that I was petrified of seeing Otter. The thought of facing him after the things I said made my stomach turn, so it had been easier just to say that I would worry about it tomorrow. He never left my head, however, so it made this self-imposed banishment that much harder. But I couldn't get the words to come out.

"When, Bear?" Creed insisted.

Fuck it. "Tomorrow, then," I relented. I pulled the phone away from my ear, Creed joyfully shouting through the receiver.

"And then everything can be back to normal," he said happily.

I snorted. "Back to normal? You had no idea what was going on, so how could it be *back* to normal?"

"Don't be difficult just because you can be," Creed growled. "It's really unattractive. Maybe I'll just go tell Otter myself right now so he knows what he can expect tomorrow."

I panicked. "You wouldn't dare."

He laughed wickedly. "I so would."

"I told you I would do it tomorrow!"

He laughed. "Should I make plans, then? So you guys can... *reconnect*?" he asked, his last word coming out low and husky and breathy.

I rolled my eyes. "Well, I would say yes, you shouldn't be there, but past experience dictates that Anna, Mrs. Paquinn, the Kid, and you will all be there to show your *support*, so it really doesn't matter what I say."

"God, you have a great family," he said smugly.

"Yeah, yeah. I know."

"Sure I can't convince you?"

I sighed. "Not tonight. I'll take it easy with the Kid tonight and come over in the morning. I'll call you before I head out."

"Okay, and uh."

"What?"

He hesitated. Then, "When you're done talking or whatever to Otter, there's something I need to talk to you about too."

I groaned. "You're not going to tell me you have a boyfriend too, are you?"

He laughed, but I noticed it sounded uneasy. "No, Jesus. Just because the two main dudes in my life went dark side doesn't mean I have to. Stop with your gay-conversion agenda."

"Were your main dudes? What are you, fifteen?"

"Shut it, Papa Bear."

I was curious. "Is everything okay? Nothing bad happened or anything?"

"No, everything's fine," he replied quickly.

"Then why don't you just tell me now?"

"Are you going to come over and talk to Otter now?"

"Har, har. I don't need to know that badly, not if it's not life-threatening."

"It's not."

"So, tomorrow, then?"

"Tomorrow," he agreed. "And, Bear?"

"Yeah?"

"You know that everything is going to be okay, right?"

I thought for a moment. "I think I do," I said slowly. "It may take a while, but it looks like it's going that way, huh?"

"Whatever it takes, man. You know?"

"I do. Creed, I don't think I've said thank you for having your parents pay for the law—"

"You don't have to," he interrupted, his voice gruff. I wished I could have seen his face. "You just ask, and you know I'll do whatever I can for you."

"I know," I said quietly.

"Later, Papa Bear."

The next time I spoke to him, he was panicking.

THE Kid didn't like that I was staying home but grudgingly agreed with my reasons to do so. He forgot his frustrations when I told him I would be going over to see Otter tomorrow to try and get everything back. He jumped into my lap and babbled happily into my ear.

I decided to make him whatever he wanted for dinner, and he went online and found a gross-looking vegetarian thing that appeared to have been scraped from the underside of a wet log. I told him we didn't have any of the ingredients for that. He told me that's why God invented grocery stores. I told him God didn't invent grocery stores. He told me that I had no proof of this, and wouldn't I feel stupid when I died and went to heaven and saw God's Food Mart? I told him that was a dumb name for a grocery store. He told me that I couldn't do any better. I told him God's grocery store was named God's Amazing Food Emporium and that they had weekly specials on the Body Of Christ Sourdough bread loaves. He told me I was sacrilegious. I told him we weren't any kind of religious.

We had just left the apartment to head to the store when Mrs. Paquinn stuck her head out. "I'll watch the Kid tomorrow when you go over to Otters."

Should we say around nine?”

I stared at her. “How did you—goddammit, did Creed call you *already*?”

“Dont be difficult, Bear. Its unattractive.”

My eyes narrowed. “You *did* talk to Creed.”

She smiled. “Tomorrow? Around nine.”

I rolled my eyes. “Yes, that should be fine. Do you want to come over for dinner?”

“No, thank you. I need to get to bed early so I can make sure I am up and prepared to watch Tyson. At nine.”

“I got it, Mrs. Paquinn. I got it.”

WE GOT to my work, and I let the Kid go with a list while I went to the office to check the schedule for the coming week. I was off tomorrow and didnt have to be in till the afternoon of the day after. That was good. It either left me with enough time to grovel on my knees for forgiveness from Otter, which would hopefully lead to me needing to be on my knees for other reasons, or it would give me enough time to find the nearest bridge to jump off of when he rejected me.

It has to work, I thought.

“So Ill be over about eight forty-five tomorrow morning,” Anna said, startling me. I hadnt heard her approach. I watched her swipe her time sheet as she clocked out.

“Tomorrow?” I asked, confused.

“Well, Mrs. Paquinn said that shes watching the Kid, and Creed says youre going over in the morning, so I figured I can drop you off and pick up Creed.”

Jesus Christ. “I just *had* these conversations. How the hell did you find out already?” I groaned.

She smiled and shrugged. “Creed called me, and then I called Mrs. Paquinn. Its really not that hard of a concept, Bear.”

“Well, Im so glad you all are taking such an active interest in this,” I groused. She flipped her hair. “Well, it does kind of affect all of us, you know,” she pointed out.

I didnt know. “How do you figure?” I asked, the sarcasm evident in my voice.

Her eyes flashed. “Dont be difficult, Bear. Its really—”

“Unattractive. I know, I know.”

She smiled thinly. “Be ready to go when I get there, no excuses, no delays.

Got it?” Her face scrunched up. “Maybe you should get a haircut before you go, so Otter doesn't think he's agreeing to love a homeless person.”

I fought back everything I really wanted to say. That was a battle almost lost. I nodded instead.

“Good, now I have to run and help Creed finish setting up. What time tomorrow, Bear?”

“Eight forty-five.”

She smiled and walked away.

Nosy, nosy people.

THE Kid enjoyed dinner, saying that it turned out great. I said it tasted like sawdust, so I put ketchup and bacon bits on mine. The Kid told me that he thought gay people were supposed to be classy, but then he looked me up and down and said that even nice stereotypes can be a detriment to society because I obviously wasn't classy. I threatened to put bacon bits in everything I cooked him from now on. The Kid said he wanted to move back with his mom. I told him that wasn't funny. He grinned and said, “One day, it will be.”

I should have realized that something was going to happen. There always seems to be one final thing that occurs before the Hero of a story gets his happy ending. I thought that final thing had already happened, what with my misinformed decision to end things and the fact that I'd learned A Very Valuable Lesson. That's how stories go, isn't it? Our Hero makes a big mistake, and in doing so, learns something important that changes the way he views the world. And with that Very Valuable Lesson learned, he gets to go back and right all of his wrongs, and then he and the man of his dreams will get to fuck like monkeys as the sun sets. That's how these things *always* work. Regardless of how scared I was, regardless of how I thought the conversation would go, I didn't doubt that Otter would at least try to hear me out. He's so much better than me in that regard. I knew that even if the outcome wasn't what I wanted, even if I didn't get my happy ending, it wouldn't be because he wouldn't listen.

The night was normal. We had dinner. We watched TV. We talked, laughed, bickered affectionately. As always, the Kid's eyes drooped, and his head started nodding to the side, and even though he said he wasn't tired, I still picked him up. We brushed our teeth. I got him into his PJs. He got into bed, the covers up to his chin. We talked some more, things that I think will stay just between us, between brothers. He played with my fingers while he spoke, his eyes on mine. Finally, his eyes closed and a little snore erupted

from his slack mouth. I bent over and kissed his forehead and closed the door.

I did laundry. I cleaned up the kitchen. I cleaned the bathroom. I watched some more TV. I tried not to think too much about the next day, realizing that I could plan every single word I was going to say, but my mouth would open and run on its own so there really was no point. As long as I could tell him that I loved him, that I would always love him, I think I would have been fine with everything else.

I hadn't realized I'd fallen asleep until the ringing phone jerked me awake. I glanced at the clock: eleven forty-two. I had only been out for thirty minutes. The phone rang again.

Creed.

I rolled my eyes and connected the call. "Drunk dialing already? Isn't it a little early for that? I expected it to be after one when you first called."

"Bear?" Creed's voice came through, strained. I could hear someone murmuring in the background. Beyond that, a loud *thumpthumpthump* of music. "Bear, can you hear me?"

"How much have you had?" I laughed.

"Shut up and listen!" he shouted. I sat up straight at the sound of the panic in his voice.

"What's going on, Creed? Is everyone okay?"

"No, it's not. He's *leaving*."

"What? Who?"

"Otter! He's packing up his shit, and he's leaving!"

"What?" I whispered. "To go where?"

"Where the fuck do you think? Back to California. Bear, you've got to fix this now! You can't let him leave!"

"But—"

"No *buts*!" Creed screamed. "Now!"

"Creed?"

"Bear?"

"It's strong. I'll fix this."

He took a deep breath. "I know. Are you coming now?"

"Let me drop the Kid with Mrs. Paquinn, and I will be over. Don't let him leave."

"Hurry," Creed said, and then he was gone.

I ALREADY told you I drove like a madman through the streets of Seafare. I

already told you that I jumped the curb and left my car running. I already told you that I ran up the stairs and burst into Otters room. You know what waits inside. What you dont know is that as I blew through a stop sign (undoubtedly doing Mrs. Paquinn proud), I felt the tremors start again from deep inside me, the beginning of an earthquake that caused my teeth to chatter. I knew, though, that somehow this one was different. Whatever last vestiges I seemed to be holding onto started to shift and crack with the rolling of the fault line. The white noise, the lapping of the waves, the darkness of the ocean, all were getting sucked down into the chasm collapsing inside me. I knew that this was it, the final moment, where I could either go forward or back. I pushed the gas pedal down harder, *just knowing* what was waiting for me and that I was never, *ever* going back. I knew that without him, there would be no me. Naive, I know. Misguided, definitely. But it didnt matter. I had learned my Very Valuable Lesson. I was the Hero of this fucking story. I was going to get my goddamned happy ending. Ah God, how I should have realized.

NO PARKING. Shit. How many fucking people does Creed know? Where? Jump the curb. Phone makes noise. Voice mail. I'll check it later. The Kid's fine, I just left him. Just get to Otter. Put the car in park. I forgot the keys! The front door. The music is loud. Get out of my way! Sorry, sorry, sorry, excuse me, excuse me. MOVE! Where the hell are Creed and Anna? Stairs. Hallway. Door. OTTERS ROOM. Knock first? No, just fucking go in. Maybe he'll be—too late. The door slams open. Otter, at his desk. What is he thinking? His eyes are wide. Gold and green. God, he's so beautiful. God, how I've missed him. God, how I just want—who the fuck is this guy? Why is he smiling at me? Why is he walking toward me? Why am I shaking his hand?

“You must be Bear. Im Jonah, Olivers boyfriend.”

WELCOME back to the present. Youll probably wish you hadnt come. I hold Jonahs hand, and I hear Otter hiss something, but I cant quite

make it out over the blood sizzling in my ears. I want to raise my eyes to look at Otter, to get some goddamned explanation for this, but I cant stop shaking Jonahs motherfucking hand. His grip is tight, mine tighter. I want to break his fingers. I want to rip his arm off. I want to beat Otter over the head with it. Obviously, he doesnt need me. Hes going back to California with *him*. I drop Jonahs hand and spin out of the room, hearing Otter shout after me. I mean to turn right, but instead turn left, wanting to find Creed and bash his face in, too, for letting *Jonah* into the house. For fucking me over. I hate

him. I hate them all. I hear someone rushing after me. Right as I reach Creeds door and prepare to throw it open, I hear Otter shout, “No, wait!” I dont and the door flies open. The room is bright, the music loud, but my vision is clear, cold, concise. The door opens, but Creed and Anna arent quick enough, the shout from Otter not loud enough, and I see their lips pressed together, Creeds arms wrapped around Annas waist, her breasts pressed against his chest, and suddenly the last few months make perfect sense. Where Creed had been disappearing to, where hed been going *behind my back*. They jump apart, but its too late. Ive seen enough. My heart screams, my head screams, my body screams, but I stay silent. I want to move, but which way I dont know. My eyes feel black, my jaw about to snap out of its socket. I cant move. My feet are stuck to the floor. I want to leave, I want to leave so bad and just go away from all of this, go and drown in the ocean because wasnt that last earthquake a lie? Wasnt it just so deceitful? Couldnt I just hear Creeds words in my head? He said he needed—

there’s something i need to talk to you about
—to tell me something. He said that it—
everything’s fine

—wasnt important. He said that it could wait. And at that moment, doesnt Creed sound just like Otter? Dont I hear the voices mingle and mix until its Creed and Otter saying—

i won’t talk to jonah again

—things that are sugar in my ears, poison in my veins? Dont I hear Otter/Creed saying that he—

the fight for you is all i’ve ever known

—loves me? Has it all been leading to this? Is this what Ive been waiting for?

JUST STOP AND LISTEN! it screams. **DON’T DO THIS, BEAR! THINK ABOUT IT FOR ONE FUCKING SECOND!** I shove it away.

“Bear?” Anna says, her face pale. “Bear, please, just listen to me for a—”

“I was going to tell you!” Creed begs. “It just happened, and I didnt know how to say anything—”

But that all disappears as soon as I feel *his* hands on my shoulders, his big hands, those hands that I swore would always be mine. “Did you know about this?” I ask, my voice an earthquake. “Did you know?”

Theres no question as to whom this is directed, and I feel his hands tense against my shoulders, squeezing painfully, and he leans forward, his breath hot against my neck, and I shiver involuntarily. This causes a single tear to

fall from my right eye. "I just found out earlier tonight," Otter whispers, pressing his forehead against my hair. To lean back into him would be so easy. So easy.

I step away.

Creed moves forward, but I shake my head in warning, and he stops, his face relaying the panic we all must feel. But his panic is laced with guilt, and it is my undoing.

"Did you know?" I ask Creed now.

"Know?" he asks, confused. "Know what?"

"About Jonah," I grind out.

His eyes flash over my shoulder, and I know hes looking at Otter. I dont turn around. I cant.

"Otters ex? What about him?" Creed asks, but then Anna jumps forward and whispers urgently in his ear, and as if its even possible, his face gets whiter still. "That was *Jonah*? Bear, I swear to God I didnt know that! Do you really think I would have let him in had I known? Otter would never—"

"Whats going on in here?" Jonah asks from the doorway. "Family meeting," I say, whirling around. "I was just leaving." I bump past Otter, who reaches out to grab me, but I knock his hands away. Jonah is

leaning against the door frame, looking calm and collected. And he still has a smile on his face. Before I know what Im doing, my fist cocks back, and I let my arm fly and smash my knuckles into his nose. He squawks as blood flies from my fingertips, and I push by him. Hes not smiling now. Bastard.

The music *thumpthumpthumps* as I storm down the hall, ignoring the looks Im getting, ignoring the stinging pain in my hand. I hear my name called. I hear people rushing after me. I almost trip down the stairs, knocking drunken revelers left and right. Someones drink goes flying. People must see the look on my face, see the entourage racing after me, because they part, and Im like Moses leading the Jews, and they all get the fuck out of my way. Im out into the yard again. My car is still running, the lights still on. I get in, but of course, the front of the car is facing the doorway and people are crowding out. Otter, Anna, and Creed are in the front. I see Jonahs blood on Otters shirt. I wonder if Otter hugged him to get it on his shoulder like that. Did he tell him that everything was going to be all right? Is that what he said?

Theyre all shouting something, but I dont care. I throw my car into reverse and bounce over the curb again. Somehow, I dont hit anyone or

anything. I look up and see Otter moving toward me so I floor it and get the fuck out of there.

But even I cant resist: I look in my rearview mirror and see Otter tearing after me, sprinting down the dark street.

I go faster.

M_{INUTES} later, my phone vibrates. A missed call from Creed. I have one new message and one saved message. Creeds message is from before I arrived at the party. “Hey, dude, dont kill yourself trying to get over here. Anna thinks I may have freaked out too much. Besides, I think one of his friends just showed up. I dont know who. I told him where Otters room was but that he had to make it quick because you were on your way and that it was kind of important that you speak to him as soon as possible. If I dont see you when you get here, just know that I will be around. Always.”

T_{HE} second message is one that I have saved for weeks. Its Otter, and he simply says, “I love you.”

I _{PARK} somewhere. I dont know where. I pull out my phone and call Mrs. Paquinn. They havent gotten to her yet.

“Howd it go, dear?” she asks excitedly.

“Fine,” I say brightly. Too bright, but she doesnt notice. “Is the Kid okay?”

“Hes fine. Still asleep. Hasnt woken up since you left.”

“I dont know if I am going to make it home tonight,” I say evenly. “Is it okay if Tyson crashes with you? Ill be home early, hopefully before he wakes up.”

She laughs. “Of course. If he gets up before you are here, Ill let him know where youre at and have him call you.”

“Thanks,” I say, my voice wavering.

She hears it. “Bear, is everything okay?”

“Its fine.” I hear her phone click.

“Bear, Ive got another call coming in, but I dont know who that would be at this hour. You have fun tonight, okay? Be careful and give Otter my love.”

I nod, not trusting myself to speak. I hang up the phone and let the waves crash over me.

M_{OMENTS} later, I look up. I hear the ocean, and I know that its not just in my head. I get out of the car and moan softly as, in my infinite wisdom under the duress of a psychological breakdown, I see that Ive driven myself to the beach. Our beach. The one where I had first told Otter that I loved him. Its

after midnight, so theres no one here. Im alone. I dont have anywhere else to go, so I guess it doesnt matter.

I take off my shoes and walk into the sand, feeling it part and shift beneath my feet. The tide is in, and I see that where I had set up my little table, my little surprise for Otter, is completely under water. The cool water laps at my feet, and I sit down at the edge, feeling the salt against my ankles.

My phone rings. *Otter*. Ignore.

My phone rings. *Creed*. Ignore.

My phone rings. *Anna*. Ignore.

Mrs. Paquinn. *Otter*. *Otter*. *Creed*. *Anna*. *Otter*. It rings again and again.

I want to shut it off, but I cant. Not if Tyson needs me.

So I shut myself off.

I lay back into the sand, the crest of the waves whispering at my back. I feel like Im floating. The moon is bright and the stars are cold, ice chips waiting for the world to stop spinning. But it feels okay, drifting like this. *It* wants to speak, to tell me that I overreacted, that I had no right to behave the way I did. I push it away, and it floats out to sea. Its better not to have to think right now.

My phone beeps. Message. Messages.

I lift it calmly and press it against my ear.

Otter: Creed told me everything, you fucking asshole, he says, his voice thick and angry. Oh God, he told me everything. He told me why. He told me what you were coming here to do. I didn't know Jonah was going to be here! He just showed up out of nowhere. If you don't pick up the goddamn phone, I swear to God I'm going to kill you.

His voice. His words. They go out to sea too.

Creed: PICK UP YOUR FUCKING PHONE! How dare you run out like that! After all we've said to each other over the past week, how fucking dare you! PICK UP YOUR PHONE!

Anna: Bear, we're all freaking out now. Creed and Otter are losing their minds, and I think I am too. I'm so sorry you had to find out this way. Please. Call one of us back and tell us where you are.

Mrs. Paquinn: Oh, my sweet child. You should have just told me. You need to call me back. I don't want you to be by yourself right now. Don't let Tyson find out this way.

Otter: We're going over to your house. You have to be there. You just have to.

Otter: Please. Bear. Please pick up.

All go out to sea where we all drift away.

MY BACK is grainy. I am cold. There are more phone calls. I ignore them. There are more messages, but I just delete them.

THE sun breaks over the curve of the water when the Kid walks down onto the beach. At first I think he is part of a dream, that he will be swallowed up by the ocean as well, but then he leans forward and brushes his hands through my hair, and he feels so alive.

“How?” I ask.

He snorts. “It wasnt that hard to figure out where you would be. Im surprised that no one else knew.”

I sit up, feeling sand caked against my back. He watches me with those eyes, those knowing, intelligent eyes. I dont look around because I know he couldnt have come alone. But I cant feel anyone else on the beach, so I know its just us. For now.

“Why didnt you come home?” he asks.

I shrug. “I couldnt.”

He shakes his head and crawls into my lap. Hes still wearing his pajamas, and I dont want him to get wet, but he ignores my protests and lays against me.

We are quiet for a few moments. Then, “Do you trust me?”

I look down at him in surprise. “Always.”

“Do you remember when I said that I was just a little guy, that I couldnt take care of you by myself?”

I nod.

He leans back and puts his hands on my face. “Do you trust me to take care of you?”

I cant help it: I crush him into me, feeling his warmth. “I know I messed up, Kid.”

He laughs softly. “You did. But youre lucky to have someone like me who can tell you that.”

“They lied to me.”

“Anna and Creed?”

I nod.

“They didnt lie to you about anything. You never asked. They just chose not to tell you. Not until they were comfortable with telling everyone. Sound familiar?”

“But—”

He shakes his head again. “Theres no way around it, Papa Bear. They did

the exact same thing you did. And you remember how that turned out, right? They all stood by you, no matter what.”

I hang my head.

“I may not be the biggest Kid in the world, and I may not be the smartest, and I may not have been around to learn everything there is to

know, but I do know this: people in love do the stupidest things. You should know that better than anyone. After all, youve been lucky to love two people who loved you back. But you walked away from Otter. Twice. Without giving him a chance either time. How fair is that?”

Theres no point in disagreeing with him. So I dont.

“You have so many great people in your life, people who are willing to do anything for you.” His voice begins to take on heat. “They bend over backwards for you, and all you can do is push them away. How long is it going to be until you push me away?”

My eyes snap shut. “I would *never*—”

“You say that now,” he shouts at me, spitting venom, surprising me with his anger, “but I wouldve thought you would never push anyone else close to us away, either! How can I be expected to take care of you if you wont even take care of yourself?”

I say nothing.

The little Kid in my lap continues: “Were only given so many people in our lives, so many people that will love us unconditionally. Why do you

think that is? *I* think its because of times like this, times when you think they are gone and you see just how big of a hole in your heart that you have. And its big, isnt it, Bear? Were all a puzzle and when one of us is gone, that piece is missing, and were incomplete. You above all others should have realized that.

“You have a chance, a chance to make something for yourself, something that is just for you, but that you can share with the rest of the world. How *dare* you throw it back in our faces.”

The Kid suddenly stands before me, and its like hes ten feet tall. His eyes blaze, his jaw set, and I think how much he looks like me. He really is mine. “The Bear I know wouldnt let this happen. The Bear I know would kick and scream and claw his way to protect whats his. The Bear I know would fight. And fight. And fight until he had nothing left in him, because the Bear I know would never give up.”

“I punched Jonah in the face,” I say stupidly.

The Kid snickers. "I know. Otter told me. I meant figuratively, you dumbass. You probably shouldnt be punching anyone. You know why?"

I shake my head, and he leans down, pressing his lips against my cheek.

"Because youre just a little guy," he says, "and you need all of us to help fight for you. Let us do this, at least this once."

I look up at him. "Can I do this?" I ask, hoping.

He, whos great and wise and kind, tells me I can.

I look past him, at the ocean and the sun and the waves. Theres no argument against any of his words. And I know, as Ive always known, that when my nine-year-old vegetarian ecoterrorist-in-training tells me to do something, I better goddamn do it.

I raise my hands to him, and he pulls me up. I hug him to my side and marvel how his head barely reaches my stomach. "Id be lost without you," I say truthfully.

He laughs. "Duh."

I look up the sandy dune to the parking lot and see only my car. "Did you walk here?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "They all drove me. Everyone wanted to get out and run down to you, but I told them to go home. To just let me go. That sometimes, what needs to be said should just be between brothers."

"Where do we go from here?" I ask, meaning now, meaning forever. The Kid looks up at me and dazzles me yet again: "We go home, Papa

Bear. Theyre waiting for us."

"All of them?"

"All of them."

THE drive is quiet. The Kid holds my hand, playing with my fingers. I think

everything that needs to be said between us has been said, but then I hear him mumbling something to himself as he looks out the window. When I hear the words, I grin:

Otter! Otter! Otter!

Don't lead cows to slaughter!

I love you and I know

I should've told you soon-a

But you didn't buy the dolphin-safe tuna!

Now everythings been said.

WE WALK up the stairs to my apartment, the Kid leading me by the hand. He takes his house key from its hiding place in his underwear ("Pajamas dont

have pockets, Bear, so stop laughing!”) and puts it in the lock. The tumblers click and snap, and the key twists. The door opens, and the Kid pulls me inside.

Instantly, theres a stampede from the living room as our family crowds into the hallway, led by Otter. He sees us standing in the doorway and hesitates. Anna, Creed, and Mrs. Paquinn peer over his shoulder. We all stand for a moment, staring at each other. It should be awkward, but its not. I drink my fill of them, of him. His chest rises rapidly and falls as he breathes. The hard planes of his pectorals stretch the fabric of his shirt alarmingly. His arms are bunched up massively as he crosses them over his front. His mouth is set. His nose is flaring, his forehead creased, but his eyes, his eyes are the same. I think they always will be.

“Im sorry,” I say, not taking my eyes off of him, somehow knowing that if I do, hell disappear, and Ill realize that this was all just a dream. I try to make my voice steady, but its been too long of a night for that to ever happen. It wavers slightly, and something inside Otter snaps, and he rushes forward, the determination never leaving his eyes, and I know somehow that he is going to wrap me in his arms and what needs to be said wont be. I raise my hand to block him and step back. I hope to God I wont ever have to see that look in his eyes again, the one he is giving me now as he stops. “Not... not yet, Otter. I need to talk to all of you first. Then... then we can see.”

He nods tightly and spins around, pushing everyone into the living room. The Kid drags me by the arm, and surprise, surprise, it just so happens that the only available seat left is right next to Otter. The Kid looks at me expectantly and jerks his chin toward the empty seat. He lets me go and goes to sit on Creeds lap.

I move carefully, calculating the number of steps it takes me to reach Otter. Seven. It takes me three seconds to turn and sit down. I pop my knuckles four times. I count to ten in my head. It takes me twelve seconds to think about what to say, five more to realize again I wont have any control over it, seventeen seconds to argue with myself, ten to shut off the voices in my head, and by then a full minute has gone by in utter silence. If someone was watching this without knowing what was going on, they would probably think we were mimes that didnt do mime stuff. Just sad, sad mimes—

Mrs. Paquinn finally acts like Mrs. Paquinn and interrupts my intelligent internal monologue by saying, “Bear, I think having sand in your butt crack must be really uncomfortable. Maybe you should go change your clothes.

You dont want to catch sand crabs. Whats the point of getting crabs when you werent having any fun doing it?”

“Sand crabs?” I spit out.

“Sand crabs,” she repeats. “I can just imagine that the rest of the day wont go well for you when you have to go to the doctor and explain how you got a sexually transmitted disease without actually being sexually active.”

“Is it considered an STD if theyre sand crabs?” Creed muses out loud. “Oh yes,” Mrs. Paquinn replies. “I should think thats a real thing, but I cant say for sure because I would be lying. But it seems to me that it certainly *sounds* like a real thing, doesnt it?”

“You can get crabs from a toilet seat,” the Kid adds. “MSNBC did this black-light thing in hotel rooms, and it showed crabs in the bathroom and ejaculate on the ceiling.”

Is this really happening?

“My goodness,” Mrs. Paquinn breathes. “How did it get all the way up there?”

“The crabs?” Anna jumps in. “Well, Im pretty sure they can jump off of you ___”

“No, dear,” Mrs. Paquinn interrupts. “The ejaculate on the ceiling. That just doesnt seem humanly possible. Ive never known a man to be able to do that. Not that Ive had too much experience in the matter. My Joseph, God love him, wasnt capable of quite the superhuman feat himself.”

“I dont know,” the Kid says with a shrug, his forehead scrunched in deep concentration. “They never said how it got there. Whats ejaculate, anyways? They didnt explain, but I want to know why it glowed in the black light.”

Mrs. Paquinn shifts her weight to turn toward the Kid. “Well, Tyson, when a man and a woman—or a man and a man, or a woman and a woman, but I dont think that works quite the same way—love each other very much and decide to have relations, ejaculate is what comes out and makes babies. Well, it makes babies if you are a man and a woman. If its just two men, I would assume all it makes is a mess.” She peers at Otter and me for clarification. We give none.

“Oh,” the Kid says. “So does spanking and fisting make babies too? I mean, if its a man and a woman?”

I choke on my tongue.

Mrs. Paquinn looks stern. “I wouldnt know anything about that. My Joseph, God love him, was never into that kind of thing. He was very *vanilla*, as I

believe they say these days.”

“Vanilla?” the Kid asks. “I tried vanilla soy ice cream once, and it was gross. Even for soy ice cream.”

Creed laughs. “I think its not the vanilla part of it, Kid. All soy ice cream is gross.”

The Kid shoots him an evil look. “You say that, but I bet its just your veal-induced guilt talking.”

“Veal is cow, Kid,” Creed argues. “What good are cows if we cant eat them?”

“Veal is baby cows! Why would you eat baby *anything*?”

“Veal is baby cow?” Creed asks, looking slightly green and horrified. “How in Gods name did I not know that?”

Anna pats his arm. I watch them closely as she says, “I think theres a lot about a lot of things you dont know.”

“Its okay, Anna,” the Kid says, letting out a long-suffering sigh. “I have some literature that Creed can take with him and read. Its life-changing.”

Mrs. Paquinn sniffs. “I dont eat veal either because I just feel so guilty picturing their little faces every time. But Ill have a steak every now and then. No one thinks grown-up cows are cute.”

“Is veal really baby cows?” Creed whispers.

“*Are you all fucking insane?*” I scream.

Mrs. Paquinn claps her hands. “Oh good, Bear has finally decided to speak.”

“About goddamn time,” the Kid mumbles.

“Watch your mouth,” Anna admonishes him, lightly tapping him on the back of his hand. Then she smacks Creed on the back of his head. “And he gets those words from you, so you watch your language too.”

“Bear just said *fucking*!” Creed whines, rubbing what Im sure is a gaping wound on his head.

“Well, Bear just felt left out of the conversation, and hes had a rough night,” Mrs. Paquinn explains. “I think „fucking was the straightest way to the point he was trying to make.” She suddenly raises her hand to her mouth and giggles as she blushes. “Fucking was the straightest? Oh, listen to me, making funny sentences.” Creed and the Kid laugh. Anna smacks them both again. Then they all stop and look at me. I open my mouth to speak.

Otter kisses me.

I hear shocked gasps coming from our audience as his hands come up to the side of my face. My eyes are bugging out of my head, and Im looking

straight (ha, ha, ha aren't we all just so punny!) into his eyes. His thumbs brush over my eyebrows and my forehead, smoothing out all the bumps and wrinkles. His lips are warm as they move across mine, his fingers trailing fire in their wake. And still he looks at me. The gold and green are so close that I can make out myself in their reflection. I look like I'm about to explode. And then my body melts, and I sigh quietly into his mouth, and he kisses up the side of my jaw to my cheek, my forehead, my hair, my eyes. I fall into him, and he wraps me tightly in those big arms, and I let it all out. He rocks me back and forth, and I hear him whisper, "Never again, you hear me? Never again. Something happens, you tell me. I need you to tell me. *I need you.*" I nod blindly into his chest, and he strokes my hair. He lets me lay there for a moment and then pulls my face back and kisses the tears away.

"I want them to leave," I mumble.

He nods and smiles, that crooked grin in full force. "Soon. Creed and Anna need to speak to you first. After that, we'll go wherever you want. Just you and me." He kisses me again gently and pulls me back into the couch, curling me into the crook of his arm protectively. I grab his hand tightly, not wanting to let go. I think he's indulging me in this, but some part of me believes he doesn't want to let go, either, by the way he's clutching me. He smells so fucking good. I rub my face on his chest, trying to get the wetness off. His heart beats quickly, and I press my free hand against it. He grunts softly and captures my hand in his and presses down harder. I think I know what he's trying to say. I feel slightly better knowing we will at least have a chance to talk before... whatever happens.

I look back at the others sitting across from us, and I am surprised to see the smiles on their faces, even Anna's. Creed's smile is a little green, as I'm sure seeing his brother and his best friend make out isn't necessarily on the top of his to-do list, but at least he's trying. I spy their hands between them, clasped. Creed's thumb strokes over Anna's.

"So, you two, huh?" I ask, wondering if I'm still angry. "This something new?"

They look at each other and blush slightly.

Anna speaks for them.

Once upon a time, Anna broke up with her stupid gay boyfriend. She didn't know for a fact that he was *gay*, but there was always something that came across his face when he spoke the magic word: *Otter*. She tried to ignore the signs, tried to ignore the feeling in the pit of her stomach that ate away at her.

It couldn't possibly be true, could it? Sure, her stupid gay boyfriend was always there for her, could always... *perform* when it was required, so why would these thoughts never go away?

One day, the magic word made a dumb decision and fled town to the mythical far away land of California. She never really understood the reason why, at least at the time, but the whispers in her own head saw the way her boyfriend collapsed in on himself, saw the way he became cold, distant. She tried to do the math but never came up with the right answer. She knew something had happened, something bad that she wasn't privy to, but it never stopped her from wondering. She went on with her life, trying to pick up the pieces that were left behind.

It was tiring to do so, but she knew it was necessary. No one could go through what her boyfriend went through and not break. But even as she tried to put him back together, the pieces wouldn't fit right, and no matter what she did, she couldn't make him whole again. Anna began to doubt herself, but she also began to look closer.

For three whole years, she looked closer. Then one day, not so very long ago, the magic word came back. She didn't know why. She saw the way her boyfriend was angry at first, angrier than she had seen him in a long time. Then she saw him slowly awaken, as if from a deep sleep. Something in him sparked back to life, and she knew it was nothing she did. The voices that spoke to her, that whispered dark things to her, said that she could never be what Otter was. Anna made some bad choices (but weren't they the only choices she could make?) and harsh words were said. Even as her own heart was breaking, she broke his. She didn't believe that was even possible. It made her doubt her actions, made her believe she made the wrong decision. And then, on that fateful night, she called Otter. She didn't accuse him, didn't relay her fears. In return, Otter told her a story about his adventures in California. He told her that he came back to find himself, that he wasn't happy where he was. And while she believed his words, she felt that something was missing from his story, that it was broken somehow. So broke that it rang false in her ears. She pushed Otter toward her ex-boyfriend and prayed that what she felt to be true was a lie. But in her heart, she knew it wasn't.

She gave them space, gave them time. She didn't want to push further because if she was wrong, it would be all the worse because of it. Yet the next time she saw him, he seemed different. He was wary around her, didn't

seem to have the right words to say. But it was there, something behind his eyes that danced like shed never seen them dance before. She wanted to scream and shout and punch and kick, but she couldnt. She waited. And waited. And waited.

And while she was waiting, something funny happened. She leaned on someone she had never leaned on before. The magic word had a brother, you see, and although he had been around almost all her life, shed never thought of him as more than a friend. Even while her heart was broken, she felt something stir inside her. She wondered if it was out of anger that she felt it. Out of jealousy (of what, she didnt yet know). She wasnt trying to get back at her stupid ex-boyfriend when it happened for the first time. She doesnt even know how it happened. They were talking about nothing and everything, and someone leaned in and someone else leaned closer and their lips met, and it was awkward, and it felt strange, and the lips were so alien to her, but she didnt stop.

Anna and Creed both felt guilty, of course. How could they not? They both felt like they were betraying the one thing that bound them together. But even as they swore that it would never happen again, it did. It happened again and again and again. And then she didnt want it to stop anymore. She was happy, or at least as happy as she could be. She felt that she deserved it. She felt it was owed to her. She had done nothing wrong, she decided, even as she called herself a liar.

It went on, as these things seem to do. There were good days, and there were bad days. She felt strong and weak and forgiving and spiteful all at the same time. And after a while, she felt herself falling for the brother, the best friend, the constant who had been background noise for most of her life.

But still, she wondered.

Then came the day when the brother came running into her room, his eyes shell-shocked, his body trembling. She held him for a long time that

night. He wouldnt say what was wrong, wouldnt even give her a hint, so she just held him. They fell asleep... and were awoken by furious pounding at the door. She left the brother where he was and opened the door and saw the Kid before her. He was terrified and angry, and somehow the truth, that long-suspected truth, made itself known. The Kid didnt have to put any specifics behind it, only saying that his brother was lost so very far in himself. Because of their mother. Their mother had come back and taken everything away. She thought to the night before, to the other brother lying in

her bed. And thats when she knew. And as she held onto the trembling Kid, her anger rose again, unbidden but there nonetheless. She called her ex, hiding behind a veil.

And when he arrived, when he held the Kid in his arms, when he looked at them with determination in his eyes, she knew. And then he said—

ANNA looks down at her hands. “You said you were in love with him, that you needed to fix it. You had such desperation in your voice, and I knew you had never felt like that for me, before.” She shakes her head, interrupting my protests. “I know you loved me. But this... this was different and dont you dare say otherwise.” She paws at her eyes, trying to clear her vision. “I threw it back in your face. Because, for once, I hated being right. But that didnt stop me, because it made everything we had seem fake. Like I was just a stand-in for all those years while you figured yourself out.”

Creed rubs her knee, then looks back at us. “I didnt mean for all of this to happen, Papa Bear. You have to understand that. It was never about going behind your back, never about hurting you. Some things just happen. You of all people should know that by now. You were doing the same thing.”

“I suppose thats one way to look at it,” I say slowly, not wanting to concede just yet.

Creed snaps his head to me, suddenly furious. “One way?” he snarls. “You were fucking my brother without conveniently telling anyone you switched teams, and thats all you can say? You coldhearted bastard, how the hell can you sit there and judge *us*?”

“We had just broken up!” I hiss back. “You say it was never about going behind my back, but thats exactly what you did! Have you just been waiting all these years for us to break up so you could make your move?”

“Have you?” he retorts, his voice ice. “Is she right? Was she just someone you used until you grew a pair and finally admitted who you really were? You forget that regardless of whom youre related to in this room, regardless of who youve fucked or who youre fucking, *I’m* the most like you. I know the guilt you must have felt every time you looked in Otters face, because I know the guilt *I* felt every time I looked at Anna. You can sit there and spout your bullshit, but dont you think for a second that I dont know exactly what you did. Otter didnt have to tell me. Anna didnt have to tell me. The Kid sure as shit didnt say a goddamn thing. But I didnt need to hear it from them because the second I found out, the *second*, I knew exactly what it was like for you.”

“Dont stop you, though, did it?” I snap.

“Didn’t stop you, either. Does Anna know why Otter left to begin with? Does the Kid? Mrs. Paquinn? No? Anyone?” He smiles at me. My face goes white as Otter growls, “That’s enough, Creed. You’ve made your point.”

But he hasn’t. He turns to Anna and says, “The night Otter left? Bear got drunk and kissed Otter and then freaked out about it. Otter thought he was influencing Bear somehow and had his own freak-out and left town. That’s the real reason why he left. Everything else was a lie.” Even as he says it, the anger in his voice fades, and the blood leaves his face as he seems to realize exactly what he’s just done. The ending comes out as a whisper.

Anna looks at me, pain crystal clear. I wait for the inevitable to come, knowing no matter what I can say in return, Creed’s words ring true, and I hate him for it. I hate him for being so much stronger than I could ever be. I wait, that is, until Anna’s hand suddenly flashes upward and slaps Creed across the face, the sound chilling in its flatness. His head rocks back, and we all stare, dumbfounded.

“I knew that, you asshole,” Anna says, voice even. “I figured that out on my own. You may be right about Bear, but at least he never hurt people intentionally like that. Apologize. Now.”

He stares at her in disbelief. “You just hit me,” he says profoundly. She glares back. “You’re lucky it was me and not Otter. You may not have noticed when you were ripping open old wounds, but he’s about to do far worse than I can ever do.”

We all glance at Otter, and I shudder as I see his eyes are black yet again. I don’t know why I didn’t notice his arm around my shoulder tensing, his breath becoming ragged, his cheek twitching. I almost want to let him at it, but I can’t do that. I grab his chin and pull his face toward mine, and even though things might not be right between us yet (how could it be with so many things yet unsaid?), his gaze softens once it reaches mine, and I see whatever’s going on in his head start to ebb. I can do this for him and maybe that’s what it means to be in love: to be able to bring someone back from the brink. “We good?” I murmur, just for him to hear. He nods.

I look back at Creed, and while I see the shame written on his face, I still see the weight of his words there too. I think that maybe his immediate acceptance of Otter and me was just an act to cover his own guilt. He was too easy to win over, too quick to jump to my defense over what had to be an impossible change in the way his orderly world worked. I allow myself to be sad for a moment, wondering if things would ever be the same between us

again. I hope so, because he was right when he'd said we are the same. Whatever happens, at least I know that.

"I'm sorry," Creed mumbles.

"What happens now?" I ask, hating how small my voice sounds. Creed looks at me for a moment, then looks away. "We move on." "Is that how you want it?"

He nods. "For now. Maybe... I don't know. Maybe one day, Bear." I get up, feeling Otter's hands trailing down my back. I walk over to

Creed and hunker down before him. He still won't look at me, but it doesn't matter. He hears me. "Whatever it takes, man. I'll be here waiting for you. Whatever it takes." He gasps in a deep breath, and I see his body shake. I stand and have turned to walk back toward Otter when he reaches up and grabs my wrist. I wait.

"Do... do you think... you think you can just not be mad anymore?" he asks quietly. "That this can all just be over? I didn't mean to hurt you." "I know."

He jumps up and wraps himself around me, and I grab him back. That was fast. I expected it to last at least six more hours before we started blubbering at each other. His voice is harsh in my ear: "You know, we didn't used to be so fucking emotional about shit. I blame this on you." I laugh quietly. "Whose idea was it to be blood brothers?"

He pulls back, a look of wonder on his face. "You were thinking about that, too, weren't you? The day you told us about you and Otter."

I nod. "It's strong, Creed. You and me, we go way back. That's strong. What I have with Otter, it's strong too. You going to be okay with that?"

"I don't have a choice, do I?"

I shrug. "There's always a choice."

He chuckles. "Not with us. We go way back, remember?"

I do.

"That was so special," Mrs. Paquinn says, sniffing.

"That's one word for it," Otter grumbles.

"Oh, is someone feeling left out?" Creed laughs shakily, stepping away. I notice how his eyes flicker at his words. I hope one day he'll be okay with it.

"Speaking of," Anna says, looking pointedly at me and Otter, "I think we've said what needs to be said. For now. Don't you two have somewhere else you'd like to be?"

I nod shyly and look to my brother. "Kid, you'll be okay for a while?" I ask, needing permission from him, needing him to tell me again that it will all be

okay.

He dismisses us with a wave of his hand. "Go finish this. I expect everything back to normal by the time you get back."

Theres that word again. Normal.

Otter stands and holds out his hand. "Bear, you ready?"

I take whats offered.

15. Bear and Otter

HE DRIVES, which is probably safer as I cant take my eyes off of him. He smirks gently, and I know he can feel my gaze on his face. He does his best to ignore me, but thats okay. I just want to look at him. He looks older, somehow. Maybe its the bags around his eyes. Maybe its the lines around his mouth. I dont know. I dont care. He looks as good to me as he ever has. I want to reach out and touch him, to rub my hands through his thick, light hair, but I dont. I still dont know if this is real.

“What are you looking at?” he says in a low voice.

You, always you, I want to say. But as we all know by now, my mouth doesnt work that way. “Did I break Jonahs nose?”

He laughs and shakes his head. “What kind of an answer do you want me to give you?”

I think for a moment. “The right one.”

We pull up to a red light, and he slows to a stop before turning to me. “You didnt break his nose. Although I thought you had with how far you cocked your fist back.” He grins slightly. “Did it make you feel better?”

I look away and shrug. “He shouldnt have been so damn smug,” I grumble.

“Are you sure you werent just projecting?”

I snap back and glare at him. “Thats not funny,” I say through his giggling fit.

“Oh, Bear, one day it will be very funny.” He picks up my bruised hand and kisses it. “One day, well joke about how you punched some guy out of jealousy for me.”

I scowl. “So Ive been told. And I wasnt jealous. What the fuck was he doing there, anyways?” My eyes narrow. “Did *you* call him?” The light changes to green, and we move forward. Otter looks away. Dammit, I wanted to see his face when he answers me.

“No, Bear, I didnt,” he says quietly.

“Then what the fuck was he doing there?”

“Why do you think he was there?”

My hands tap nervously on my knee. “He wanted you to go back with him. Why did he say he was your boyfriend? Were you trying to get back together with him?” This last question comes out before I can stop myself, and I shrink in my seat, hating how my voice has taken on a whining tinge.

Its not a question I wanted to ask, but its been there, haunting me since I had seen Jonah in his room. He shouldnt have been there. I scowl again.

Otter glances over at me. "Of course I wasnt," he scoffs at me. "Why the hell would you even think that?"

I dont know. "We were... whatever," I say as I wave my hand. "You didnt know if I was coming back."

"Well, yeah," he admits. "That doesnt mean Id run right back to him. I told you, Bear, whatever was between me and him was done the moment I left to come back home."

"Yeah, he seemed to understand that real well," I mumble, picking at the hole in my hoodie sleeve. I dont know how it got there. Its still kind of wet, as are my jeans, and I can feel sand in my ass crack. It starts to itch as soon as I think of Mrs. Paquinn and her sand crabs. Lying on the beach all night in the surf was a bad idea in a long string of bad ideas. This better turn out okay, because I obviously need Otter to think for me. I have too many stupid ideas all on my own. Like not changing clothes before leaving the apartment.

"Jonahs like that," Otter says, bringing me out of my thoughts. "When he wants something, he makes sure he gets it."

"Wow, what a classy guy," I say, feeling mean. "He seems like the type that beats his boyfriends. Did he hit you? Did he let you leave the house on your own?"

"Hey," he says sternly. "If I recall, the only one hitting *anyone* was you."

"Yeah, well, dont be smug in my direction. Especially when youre fucking with whats mine," I growl.

"Yours, huh?" He glances at me again, his expression blank.

I suddenly feel embarrassed. I blush and look back out the window. I dont want to come off sounding so possessive, so *needy*. A lot of shit has been said between us, mostly by me, and here I am, mouthing off without a goddamn filter. And yet, I feel even worse things rising in my throat like bile, and I choke them back down. Fuck the filter: I need a muzzle.

"Where are we going?" I ask, changing the subject gracefully. "Youll see."

"Oh."

Silence, just for a few moments. Then, "Bear?"

"Yeah?"

"He went back to San Diego. He came here to try to get me to go back with him."

“Oh.”

“Bear?”

“Yeah?”

“I said no.”

A ^{FEW} minutes later, we pull into a neighborhood I don't recognize. The houses are older, lower middle class. Some have toys strewn across the lawn. One has pink lawn flamingos in the front yard. Another has their Christmas lights still up. Or up already. I don't know which. 'Tis the season and blah blah blah.

He pulls up in front of a house toward the end of the street. It's small and painted a weird shade of green. There's a waist-high chain-link fence that circles what I guess would be considered a front yard, if it was big enough to be called a yard. The driveway is cracked. The garage door looks like if it opened, it would fall off. Realtors would advertise it as *cozy* and a *great starter home*. Realtors are such liars.

Otter turns the car off and puts his hands on the steering wheel, tapping them nervously. He looks at the house and takes a deep breath. “Did you want to go back with him?” I blurt out, not meaning to. Now that I think about it, even a muzzle probably won't work.

He exhales explosively and laughs. “No.”

“Then why would he come here?”

He shrugs. “I told you. That's Jonah. He doesn't like taking no for an answer. Remember when I said that if I didn't pick up the phone when he called, he threatened to come here?”

I nod.

“I didn't pick up the phone. He came here. It's that simple. Although I expected it to happen a lot sooner than it did.”

Well, yippee for that. “Don't sound so disappointed,” I say to him snidely.

He cocks an eyebrow at me. “You're not going to make this easy, are you?”

“No,” I retort. I pause. “Make what easy?”

“Get out of the car,” he orders in that tone of voice he does so well. I get out of the car quickly. My knees crack, and I bend backward to pop my back, feeling sand slide down the back of my legs, tickling my skin, catching on the hairs. He walks around the car and stands next to me looking up at the house. It needs a new roof. It needs new gutters. It needs to be leveled and made into a parking lot for a Walmart that will put all the local shops out of business. Why the hell are we here? I want to go home and take a shower and change

my clothes and then take off those clothes and fuck like bunnies. Its funny, really. Even though I was ready to talk to him until I was blue in the face less than an hour ago, Im now so sick of talking about my feelings and his feelings and everyone elses feelings. Shit can wait until tomorrow. I open my mouth to say as much, but Otter speaks first. For once I dont interrupt

“He came back here to try and make me go with him,” he says, still looking at the house. “I dont know if he thought he could persuade me or what, but that didnt stop him from trying. I was shocked when he walked into my room, but I wasnt surprised. I told you that I thought he would show up at some point. I just didnt know that he would happen to pick the worst time in the world.”

I stay silent. My eyes dont leave his profile.

“Im not going to lie to you, Bear. Im human. I considered it, if only for a second. And that was the worst second of my life. Even through everything that had happened over the past few days, that was still the worst moment of it all. That I actually considered leaving with him. I felt like I was betraying you, but worse, that I was betraying myself.”

I find my voice. “Creed called me. Thats why I came over. He said you were going back to California.”

He turns to face me. “I was, and dont you give me that look, either. Creed was right: you two are the same. You never let me finish.” His admonishment is soft, but there nonetheless. “I said I was going back to San Diego, and Creed flipped out and started screaming that I couldnt, that I just couldnt. Then he called me a fucking bastard and ran out of the room.” He pauses. “I think hed had quite a few shots by that point.”

“Then what were you doing?”

“I was going back to get the rest of my stuff,” he says as he takes a step closer to me. “I was going back to pack the rest of my things, and to tell my work that I wouldnt be back after all. You see, even though this guy broke my heart, I wasnt just going to run away again.” Another step closer. I can smell him now, his Otter-ness.

“You werent?” I say, staring up at him, unable to move.

He shakes his head. “I had plans for me and him. And I wasnt going to allow a little thing like him saying I was a mistake and that he never wanted to see me again deter me from what I wanted.” Another step. I could raise my hand and touch him now, if I was so inclined.

“You werent?” I say brilliantly.

“Of course not.” His eyes flash, gold and green. “How was I to know that this guy was trying to protect me as much as he was trying to protect everyone else? How was I to know what was really going on behind those words he said to me? I didnt know, but I knew that this guy, *my* guy, wouldnt have said them without reason, without something that made sense, at least to him.” Another step and his chest bumps mine. Our hands stay at our sides. His breath warms my face.

“I shouldve told you,” I mumble, staring at the freckle on his cheek, a patch of stubble he missed while shaving near his jaw line.

“Yes, yes you should have. You shouldve told me a lot of things. Do you know how much it hurt having to hear this from Creed? To hear this from my little brother and not the man I loved?”

I gulp. “Loved?” As in past tense?

“Loved,” he repeats. “*Love.*” Oh, how my heart beats faster. “Do you know what it felt like? I felt like I couldnt be trusted to help figure this whole stupid mess out, that I wasnt capable of understanding how scared my guy must have been. But then I realized how selfish I was being, how I was just thinking about me, and how it was *I, I, I*. It was never just about you or me. It wasnt even just about the Kid, even though you thought it was. It was about all of us, Papa Bear. All of us.”

“It was?” I sniff.

He raises his strong hands and places them on my waist. The tenuous connection has been made. Electricity flashes through my body. I tremble. “It was. It is. And thats the way it always should be. Thats the way it always *will* be. You should have told me what had happened, Bear. You shouldve told me so that you had someone to lean on, someone to make it seem like the world wasnt such a scary place. I understand why you did what you did, but you shouldve trusted me enough to take care of it, to take care of us.”

For some reason, this makes me angry. I step out of his grasp, and his arms fall to his side. “I shouldve trusted you to take *care of it*?” I snarl. “What the hell would you have done? She was threatening to take the Kid away from me! She made me choose between the two of you and, God help me, I hate her for it. But I did what I had to do. Dont you say that you would have taken care of it, because theres nothing you could have done!”

“Youre right,” he agrees, and this causes me to deflate slightly. “You took care of it all on your own, didnt you? But thats not what Im saying, Bear. Im saying that while you *can* do it, you shouldnt have to.”

I throw my hands up in the air and start to pace in front of him. “Were quite fine on our own, Otter. Weve been fine for three fucking years. So the last three months have been great, so its been over the fucking moon. We dont need you to take care of us!” Who is this person talking? Who is this person who only moments ago was wanting him to tell me what to do? Why cant I shut up for once in my life? These same old arguments keep rearing their heads, and its always me bringing them up. “Hes the only thing Ive got!” I say, my voice breaking.

“Youre wrong.”

I spin around. “What?”

He steps to me again and wraps his arms around me. Hes so big, and Im just a little guy, and I cant move. I try to fight it, try to pull away, but then his hands are rubbing over my back, and his lips are near my ear, and his hot breath slides over my cheek. “Youre wrong,” he says harshly. “Youve got me.”

“Why?” I cry out. “I push and push and push you away, and you keep coming back. Why!”

“Because I fucking love you, you idiot,” he growls in my ear. “Why the hell do you think I would buy you a fucking house if I didnt love you?” I jump out of his arms again. “You *what*?”

“Uh, shit,” he says sheepishly, rubbing his hands through his hair. He then points at the green monstrosity behind us. “Surprise.”

“*You bought me a fucking house!*” I scream at him.

He looks around quickly. “Yeah, but tone it down a little. I dont want our new neighbors to think a woman is being murdered outside.” “*Our neighbors!*” I bellow at him.

He flinches. “Yeah, our neighbors. This house is for you and me and the Kid. Hell get to stay in the same school district and everything. I know it doesnt look like much now, but—”

“*You bought a house in two weeks?*” I yell.

“Well, no, Bear, it can take a couple of months to buy a house. I offered a quick cash buyout, and I was able to close on it in forty-five days, which was”—he looks down at his watch—“seventeen hours ago.”

“*You’ve been buying a house for the last two mon—*” My shout is blocked off as his hand covers my mouth.

“Jesus Christ, inside voice,” he hisses.

I glare at him over his fingers. I want to spit a loogie into his palm, but he

would just rub it on my face, so I roll my eyes, and he drops his hand. “You started buying us a house *two months ago*?” I whisper loudly, showing him my inside voice.

“Have you always been this quick? Or is it something youve developed over the last few days?”

“Youre not funny, and dont change the subject.”

Otter grins at me. “Im hilarious. And yes, I started buying the house about two months ago. Why, do you want to stay in your apartment? No offense, but it was kind of hard to drill you into the wall when you share a room with your little brother.”

My blood starts a slow slimmer, working its way to boiling. “But I broke up with you,” I spit out, the sludge still pouring out of me. “You closed on the house even though we had broken up? You could have backed out on it.”

“I could have,” he says slowly. “But I didnt.”

“And nothing about this screamed at you that this was happening way too fast?”

He shakes his head and grins that Otter grin. “Nothings too fast if it means forever, Bear.”

“*But how do you know?*”

“I have faith,” he says simply. And with this, every argument, every doubt, every single thing that has held me back dissolves into nothing. I leap at him and he catches me (of course), and I press my mouth hungrily against his and a low moan escapes him and enters me. I taste it, taste him, his hot lips and tongue as they work me over. Who knew buying me a house was one of my turn-ons? I wonder what would happen if he bought me a yacht. Or shares of Microsoft.

We make out for a little bit longer (*making out* may be too light a phrase; really, Im eating his face) until he pushes away, gasping. “We need to go inside so we dont give everyone a show right here.”

My cock is rock solid and wouldnt object to that. I grind up against him to show him as much. “You better have the fucking key to our fucking house, or were going to break the fucking door down right fucking now,” I pant at him.

“Its in my pocket,” he says, and he groans when I reach into his pocket and roughly knock his dick around while I look for the key. “My back pocket,” he says, leaning in to bite my lip, licking the sharpness away.

I reach around and shove both hands in his back pockets, handling his ass

roughly until I feel the familiar shape of a key. A house key. *Our* house key. I grasp it and pull it out, and Ive never seen anything more wonderfully frightening or catastrophically inevitable in all my life. He takes my hands in his and kisses them gently and pulls the key from my trembling fingers. Otter drags me to the front door thats the same weird shade of green as the rest of the house, but I dont seem to mind it much anymore. The lock clicks. He pushes the door open. I see a button attached to the side of the house and push it. The doorbell rings, so very much like my own. It is my own.

“It needs a lot of work,” he warns me as he shuts the door behind me. “Well need to pull up the carpet, but Im told there are some really nice hardwood floors underneath. I think well have to—”

Ive heard enough. I dont care about the house right now (but seriously, though, he bought us a house? How stupidly insanely stupid/epic is that?). I cut off his words about hardwood floors and carpet and whatever else hes going to say as I press my mouth feverishly against his. The way his hands are instantly upon me show me that he doesnt mind the interruption. I marvel at his talented fingers, going right to my ass as he pulls me roughly against him. I groan into his face.

“Theres no bed, Papa Bear,” he growls into my mouth as he licks and nips.

“You said something about drilling me into a wall?” I say breathlessly. I have a moment to regret my words when his eyes flash dangerously. Otter paws desperately at the button of my jeans. My cock bobs free, and the air is cold until his mouth is on me, trying to suck my brains out. My eyes roll back into my head, and the edges of my vision grow hazy, and all rational thought is gone. Thats okay, though. I think too much anyway.

He licks the tip of my dick and looks up at me, eyes lidded and beautiful. “I dont have any lube,” he says as he nuzzles my balls. Its the most romantic thing hes ever said to me until I actually understand his words.

“Oh, for fucks sake!” I howl. I jerk him up to his feet with strength I dont know I have. I rip at the front of his jeans and the button breaks off. We dont care. Making sure hes watching me, I spit into my hand and slather it over his heated cock. His eyes go wide as he rocks his head back and groans.

“Thats going to hurt, baby,” he says, not really fighting me on it. I shudder at his endearment: hes never called me that before. It shakes me. It moves me. It makes it all the more of a necessity that he is in me right now. I grab the back of his head and pull his eyes back down to mine. I bring his hand up to my mouth and suck on two of his fingers greedily, getting them as

wet as I can. I spit them out ungracefully, drool hanging from my lips.

“Get me ready,” I hiss at him.

He does.

When he enters me, it burns, the sting traveling up and down my body. I think maybe it will be enough to actually say this was a bad idea, but then he angles himself differently, and heaven breaks open, and angels spill down and a choir sings the gospel according to gay sex: *PROSTATE!* Wave after wave crashes over me, pleasure and pain, but I'm tethered to him and he's got me and in that moment it starts it starts—

it starts as a wind begins to blow past me, over me, through me, pushing the gathering storm out to sea. The sun breaks through the clouds and there begins a deep rumbling noise deep from within the waves. The ground shifts and shakes and eventually breaks apart. The ocean, that damnable ocean, begins to rush toward the chasm that has opened, forming a whirlpool that howls and screams as it spins. Lightning flashes, thunder rumbles, but it is so far away now. As I watch, the ocean gives a dying gasp as the seabed is transformed into a desert. The storm dies. The sun shines. The dusty surface is cracked, parched. But it holds together. A small breeze ruffles my hair, reminding me of what I've done to get to this point. I close my eyes and breathe deeply, and from there, from there

— and from there, the only thing I can do is hold on for dear life, hold on while this man, my Otter, shows me just how much he loves me. I only hope he feels it in return. I hope he sees that I will give him all I can. I hope he sees that I'm in this for the long haul.

And you know what? All of you that have stuck with me through to the end? I think he sees it just fine.

Epilogue or Otter's Perspective, As It Were (Bear's Gonna Freak)

Six months later

THE Kid shouts at me as he gets off the school bus. He turns and waves to some girl hanging out the window screaming at him. He rolls his eyes as he turns back to me.

"Whos that?" I grin at him.

He scowls. "Some sixth grader whos got it in her head that its adorable for a nine-year-old to be in the fifth grade. She told me Im *precious*."

I laugh. "Older women, huh? Dont let Papa Bear know about that. Hes still a wreck over letting you skip a grade."

He grabs my hand and pulls me inside. "Dont remind me," he grumbles over his shoulder. "He wrote another note and put it in my lunch again."

I groan as I slide his bag off his back. "What did it say this time?"

The Kid scrunches his face up, and when his voice comes out, its an eerie imitation of Bear. "„Kid, please dont correct your teacher again in class. I dont want to be called in for another Brother-Teacher conference about how you need to skip to your freshman year in college. My heart cant take it."

"Well, hes got a point."

The Kid shakes his head. "How can a certified teacher not know how to spell *constitution*? No wonder Anderson Cooper says our school systems are failing the students."

"And we all know that if Anderson Cooper says its true, it must be."

His eyes narrow. "I would agree with you, but youre obviously making fun of me."

I ruffle his hair. "Obviously. Speaking of the system, dont forget the social worker is coming over tomorrow at three."

"How could I forget about Olga Ehrlichman?" he scowls. "I swear she makes her German accent worse just to weird me out."

"I dont think shes German, Kid."

He throws his hands up in the air. "Thats what *you* think. I know shes trying to get me to be a part of the *Schutzstaffel*. Cant we scare her off and get a new one? We could tell her were Jewish."

I shake my head, trying to hide my smile. "I dont think that would be such a great idea. Weve got another court date coming up next month, and we dont want to take the chance of it being the time your mother actually shows up."

"I dont know why we have to keep going to court," he mumbles. "If she had the balls to try anything, I think it would have happened by now." I think hes right, but I dont tell him so. Not until Bear and I can be sure. And we wont be sure until the Kid legally belongs to Bear. It shouldnt be that much longer, at least according to the attorney. The judge had tried to throw a little fit about the whole power of attorney thing ("This illegally obtained power of attorney was acquired with an exchange of *cigarettes*?"), but Erica Sharp of the illustrious Weiss, Goldstein, and Eddington had grinned her shark-like grin and tore the judge a new asshole. It was brutal to watch, especially when she trotted out the Kid like a show dog and the Kid had hammed it up by giving his best Oliver Twist "Please, sir, can I have some more?" look that he does so well. His eyes were wide and his lower lip trembled ever so slightly, and I swear to God I could hear the judges heart melting from where I sat in the galley twenty feet away. Hell, I almost stood up and demanded to adopt the Kid myself right then. He was that good.

The social worker visits have gone well, no matter the Kids observations of her heritage. Hes not stupid and is always on his best behavior when shes here. I had wondered before her first visit if she would have said anything about Bear and me. But of course, she didnt bat an eye when she walked in on Bear kissing me sweetly, even when Bear started blushing and grumbling to himself about getting caught. Shes probably seen shitloads worse in other homes to worry about two guys kissing.

"Well see," I tell the Kid. "Just go easy on *Frau Ehrlichmann*."

The Kid goes to the fridge and pulls out his after-school snap peas.

"Everything ready for tonight?" he says, tactfully changing the subject.

I sigh. "As ready as itll ever be." I reach down and pat the two small objects in my front pocket. For the thousandth time in the last hour. "Are you sure about this?"

He crunches on the vegetables and looks at me. "Are *you*?"

I nod once.

He shrugs. "Well, then, of course Im sure." He pauses and then snickers.

"Papa Bears gonna freak out. I wish I could be here to see it," he adds wistfully.

"Thanks, Kid. As if I wasnt nervous enough already," I growl at him.

He laughs. “Youll do fine. You get everything I said to?”

I nod again.

“And you have what we wrote?”

I roll my eyes. “Seriously? You really think I should say that?”

The Kid smiles. “Seriously. You think hell get the hidden meaning in it?”

“Kid, you may be the smartest person alive, but a master of subtlety you are not.”

He starts to walk toward his room. “With Bear,” he says over his shoulder, “you kind of have to be blatant. Otherwise, hell miss the whole point.”

“And *that’s* the point of what Im about to do?” I yell after him.

“I cant hear you!” he yells back. The little liar. “I have to get ready before Mrs. Paquinn gets here. And you need to go get dressed. I got your suit ready this morning.”

I groan and sit down at the table, feeling the two small pieces of metal press against my thigh. I pull out my wallet and find the slip of paper the Kid had stuck in there a couple of days ago. We had spent hours agonizing over it, but in the end, got it just right, at least according to the Kid. I grin to myself as I read over the words Ive long since memorized.

The Kid is right: Bears gonna freak.

Bear! Bear! Bear!

I’ve something to say! Don’t be scared!

Bacon is bad! Beef is wrong!

Mad Cow Disease stays with you for a time that’s long!

I want you to be mine, can’t you see?

That’s why I am down, down on my knee!

It may not yet be legal,

but it’s better than eating a beagle,

so won’t you please marry me?

About the Author

When TJ K_{LUNE} was eight, he picked up a pen and paper and began to

write his first story (which turned out to be his own sweeping epic version of the video game Super Metroid—he didnt think the game ended very well and wanted to offer his own take on it. He never heard back from the video game company, much to his chagrin). Now, two decades later, the cast of

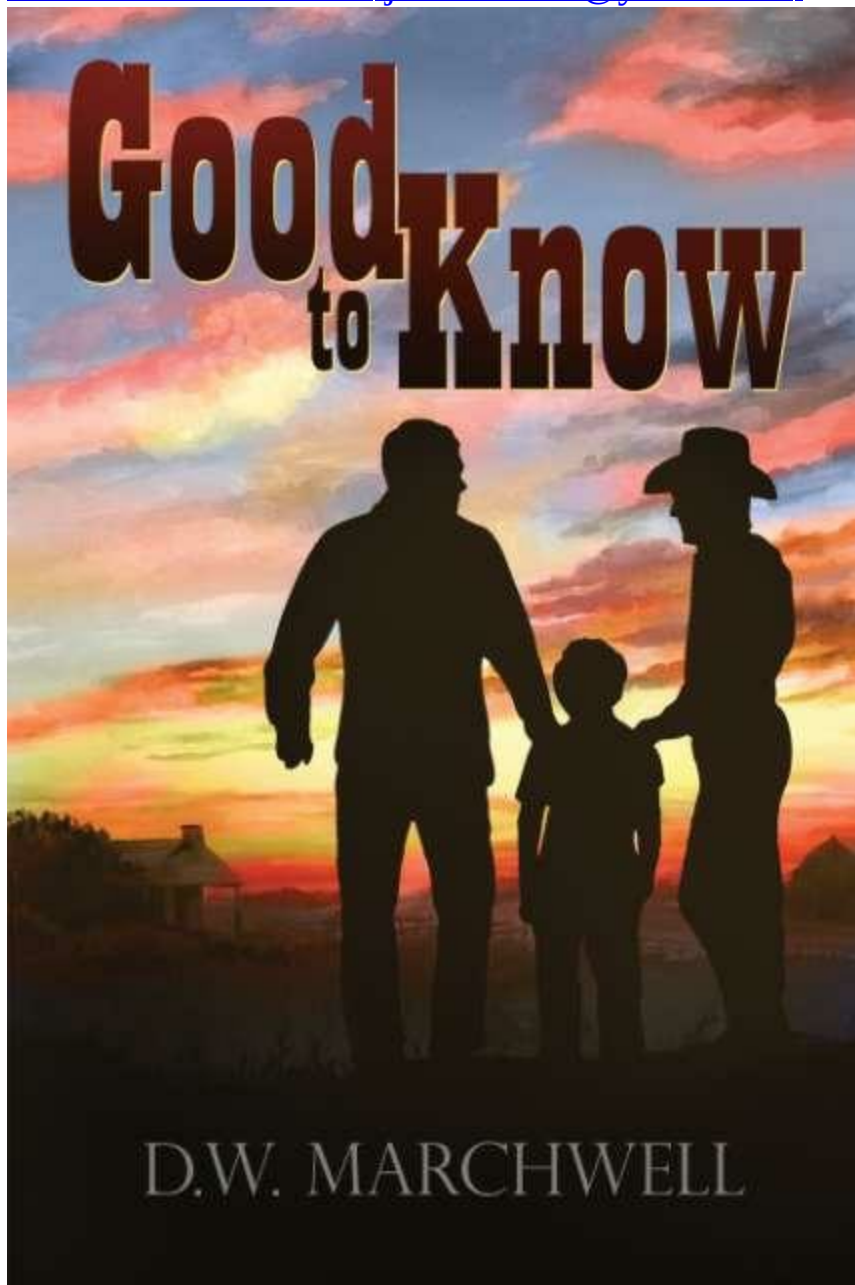
characters in his head has only gotten louder, wondering why he has to go to work as a claims examiner for an insurance company during the day when he could just stay home and write.

He lives with a neurotic cat in the middle of the Sonoran Desert. Its hot there, but he doesn't mind. He dreams about one day standing at Stonehenge, just so he can say he did.

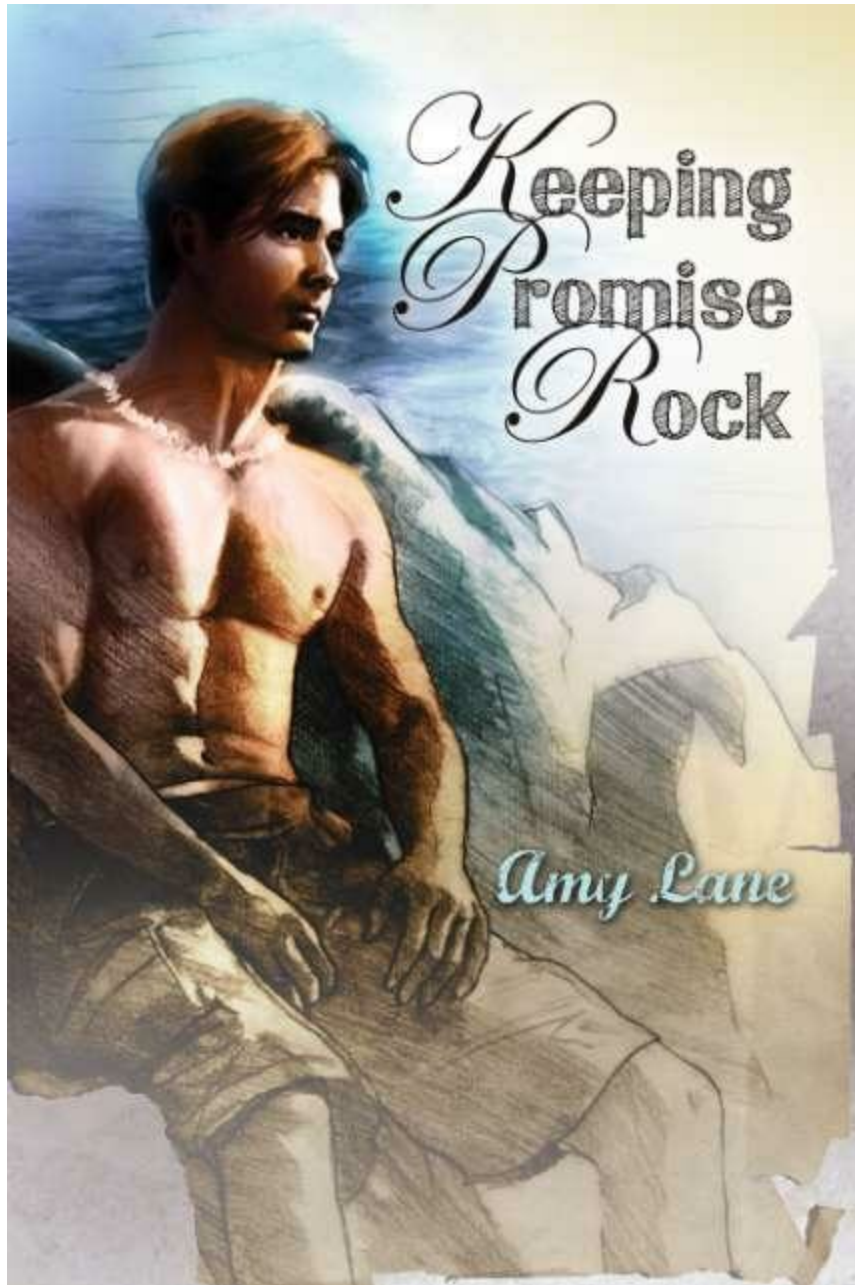
TJ can be found on Facebook under TJ Klune.

His blog is tjklunebooks.blogspot.com.

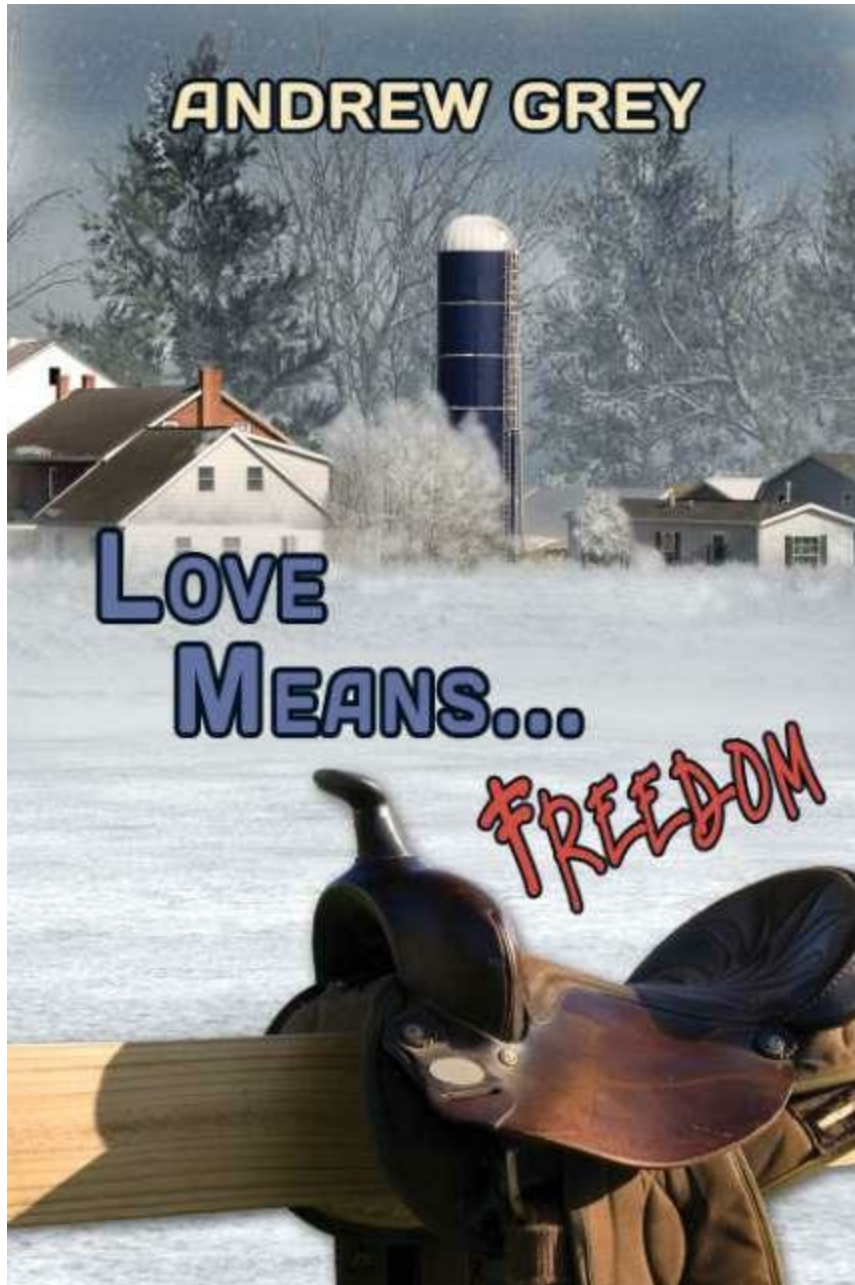
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