# Code Name:Heart

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# CHAPTER ONE

"Marty, Dear, Get up! You are going to be late on your first day of school!" My mom's voice echoed through the door of my bedroom. Today marks the beginning of my journey at Midway High, as my family has recently moved from Grand Valley, Texas, to Midway, Texas.

The reason we gave for our move is that my parents needed a change of scenery following my dad's heart attack during the summer while he was on his way to work. My mom claims it was the food he eats, but my dad believes it was the daily road rage traffic that led to his elevated stress levels. However, we had moved to Grand Valley, Texas, from Ashburn, Virginia, just three years ago, citing my mom's heart attack as the reason. My dad blamed her family's history of early heart attacks, but we can only use that excuse so many times before losing track of who had the heart issue. Both my parents are healthier than a hummingbird on a spring afternoon in April. They have been under government protection since before I was born.

As I opened my door to head to the kitchen to grab a protein bar, I heard the blender starting. I immediately chuckled to myself, thinking about Dad’s expression of nausea every morning when she makes him an herbal smoothie.

"Good morning, my favorite loving parents!" I screamed over the roaring blender, putting my head on the back of my mom’s shoulder, and gently squeezed her. What? I can’t—,” my mom screamed as I turned off the blender, "--hear you!"

She chuckles "Marty, please tell your father that these green smoothies are good for you, and they make you want to grab the bull by the horns!" She's standing there with her arms curled up. Dad, on the other side of the kitchen island, snorts, and whispers, "More like grab a roll of toilet paper and run for the bowl."

"What was that?" Mom narrowed her eyes at him. "Nothing, my love," Dad says as he grabs a cup and turns to walk into the living chuckling. Mom's been making these green smoothies way before I was born. My parents have a video of me as a toddler who was curious about everything, well let’s just say I never wanted to taste that smoothie anymore forever, Mom even makes faces when she drinks them, but always says it’s the tartness of the first release of the antioxidants the first swallow, but if you watch her carefully, she makes the same faces every swig of the green yuckiness.

"You see what I have to put up with? He's lucky I love him so much or I would’ve smothered him with a pillow a long time ago." Mom says while she's rinsing out the blender in the sink. "I can hear you! You old Wicked Witch of West." Dad yelled out of the living room. "That's why I said it! You old dried up baboon ass," Mom says with a smile on her face. "I love you honey, " Dad says in a cute tone. "Aww, I love you too," Mom says before blowing a kiss in the air towards dad. I like to wonder if anyone outside the three of us would laugh at what they say to each other, because picture a small framed woman, shoulder length dark blonde hair, who weighs probably a hundred and thirty pounds with wet clothes on, trying to hold a pillow over a guy's face who weights two hundred and twenty pounds mostly muscle. Let's be fair, they both know a hundred ways to Sunday to break someone's leg with a pillow.

"I seriously think I'm adopted." I smirk and walk out of the kitchen to get ready for school as a dishtowel land on the floor in front of me and my mom laughing behind me. I shake my head as I head back to my room, their playful banter ringing in my ears. I know my parents' dynamic might seem odd to some, but I find comfort in their quirky relationship. As I get ready for school, I can't help but feel a mix of excitement and nervousness. A new school always means new beginnings, new friends, and new opportunities. But it also means navigating unfamiliar hallways, fitting in with a new crowd, and the inevitable first-day jitters. You would think I would be used to being at a new place, but truth is I'm always worried the jocks want to pick a fight if I don't want to join the football team because they feel like "I'm too good" for them. When their overindulgence of testosterone in the weight room or on the field to simply tackle or man handle other teams' players to stroke their egos seems useless in life. I train and workout on my own. I've been working out with my parents since I was nine years old. Some parents weren't exactly supportive that their children were friends with a kid who takes part in shooting competitions. And practices styles of fighting like Aikido, Krav Maga, and Judo. Yet, I can't blame those parents because they never really ask why we practice, just assume we are closed off to ourselves. Truth is, we are a family who also practice meditation, patience, community activities like book clubs, and barbeque parties.

I decide to embrace my new surroundings for school and opt for a classic Texas look: cowboy boots, jeans, and a Future Farmer of America shirt. As I pull on my boots, I feel a sense of confidence and a connection to my new home. I rummage through my closet, searching for my baseball hat, wanting to complete the outfit. I find it tucked away on a shelf, and I place it proudly on my head. I might have been only in Texas for three years now, but I have always dressed like this. Something about cowboy boots always comforted me and grounded me in stressful situations.

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As I head back into the kitchen, I see my parents sitting at the table now, their eyes lighting up as they take in my outfit. "Look at my boy, all ready for his first day at a new school," Dad says, a hint of pride in his voice. "You look great, honey," Mom adds, her eyes shining with love and encouragement. I feel their support like a warm embrace, and I know no matter what challenges lie ahead, I have the strength of my family behind me. I grab my backpack and keys, bid my parents farewell, and step out into the warm Texas morning. My heart flutters with anticipation as I approach my trusty Chevy Silverado, a deep sapphire blue that always makes me feel like I'm riding in style.

As I make my way to Midway High, I pass a couple of taco stands that look like everyone is gathered for their morning news updates, and students walking on the sidewalk hidden by evergreen bushes next to manicured green flush lawns, but someone caught my attention four blocks from the school intersection—a lone figure with a backpack, taking his time walking along the sidewalk. I assumed he was a fellow student at Midway, but what struck me was his lack of a car. In a small town like this, everyone drove. Yet, there was something about him that captivated me. He carried himself with an air of experience, a "world-weary" aura that piqued my curiosity. It was the Texas sun casting a glow around him, or the way he seemed unaffected by the scorching August heat, but I found myself transfixed.

I watched him through my rearview mirror as I drove away, my gaze lingering a little too long. In that moment, I almost swerved and hit a mailbox. I quickly corrected my course, my heart racing. I knew I had to pay attention to the road, but my thoughts kept drifting back to him. Who was he? What was his story? I felt an inexplicable draw towards this stranger, a pull that I couldn't ignore. As I continued my way to school, I parked as close as I could to the intersection to watch this guy come into school. I wasn't trying to stalk even thou I guess this practically counted as stalking. I felt a mix of excitement and uncertainty as I watched him pass the front of my truck as he looked down walking to the front entrance.

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As I approach the entrance of Midway High, my heart skips a beat at the thought of what lies ahead. I take a deep breath, steeling myself for the unknown, when suddenly I hear the distinct sound of running cowgirl boots gaining on me.

Before I can turn, a hand taps my shoulder, and I find myself face-to-face with my next-door neighbor, a girl with a mischievous glint in her eye. "Hey there, Marty! I've seen you around the neighborhood, but we've never officially met. I'm Stacy Ramos, and it's my third year here at Midway. My family moved here from Grand View, Texas, three years ago. I believe you have met my parents already. It's interesting that you used to live right next to my city in Grand Valley and literally next door now here." I'm instantly charmed by her playful smile and the way she exudes confidence and mischief in equal measure. "Well, howdy, Stacy Ramos!" I reply, tipping my hat slightly. "I am Marty Villarreal, and I must say, you are right. I had the pleasure of meeting your parents and they exude professionalism. From what I gathered; they are quite the travelers. My family is always organizing plans for our neighbors. You should drop by sometime. I am certain my mother would adore having a young lady around." I spoke with a cheerful and inviting tone.. I was about to walk into this lion's den. Care to join me? We can face the unknown together, like a couple of modern-day pioneers." I offer her a lopsided grin, already feeling a sense of camaraderie with this unexpected partner-in-crime.,” So, what do you say? Together we ride, partner?" Stacy's eyes sparkle with amusement as she intertwines her arm undermine.

"Well, partner, I reckon we make quite the pair. Let's show these folks what we're made of. Midway High won't know what hit 'em!" With a nod and a shared smile, we stride towards the school doors with a warm chuckle.

I held the door open for Stacy as we entered the school, the familiar scent of fresh paint and newly polished floors filling my nostrils. "What's your first class, Marty?" Stacy asked, her eyes scanning the crowded hallway. I scratched my head, feeling a twinge of embarrassment. "I'm not sure, to be honest. I didn't get the memo about the orientation a couple of weeks ago, so I guess I need to head to the front office or the counselor's office. Any idea where I should go?" I asked, hoping she might have some insider knowledge. "Yeah, definitely the front office, but they'll probably make you sit through some rules and regulations first. It won't take long, though. Hey, I have some business in the library, so I might have to leave you here. Let's meet for lunch if I don't see you before then, okay?" Stacy gave my arm a quick squeeze and slid her hand down before stepping away. I nodded, feeling a mix of relief and nervousness at the thought of navigating this new place alone. As I watched Stacy walk away, her confident stride and easy smile making her seem right at home, I felt a twinge of envy. She knew her way around, and I suddenly wished I had a friend like her to show me the ropes. But I shook off the feeling, straightened my hat, and headed towards the front office, determined to face this new challenge head-on.

CHAPTER TWO

The heavy oak door swung open with a groan, revealing a woman whose face was etched with the wisdom of years. Her smile was warm, almost welcoming, but her eyes held a glint of steel that sent a shiver down my spine. "Welcome to Midway High," she said, her voice a low, steady hum. "I'm Mrs. Humphrey, the Principal."

Stacy had been right. My stomach churned. "I... I'm just here to get my schedule," I stammered, my voice barely a whisper.

Mrs. Humphrey’s smile widened, revealing a flash of perfect, white teeth. “I understand. Before I can give you your schedule, we have a few business matters to handle first. Starting with the history of Midway High foremost, Midway High is more than a school; it’s a legacy. My family has been here for generations, you see. A hundred years. My mother was the principal before me, and her mother before her. We’ve always strived for excellence, upholding tradition, and discipline.”

"Now," Mrs. Humphrey began, her voice taking on a mesmerizing quality. "There are certain rules here at Midway. Rules that have been in place for a century. No fighting. No vandalism. No food in class. This isn't a dine-in movie theatre," she spat, her eyes narrowing. "No disobeying the teachers," Mrs. Humphrey's voice echoed in my ears, her words becoming a distant murmur. Mrs. Humphrey's eyes narrowed further as she regarded me, her gaze intense and piercing. "No hats of any kind during class," she stated firmly, her voice leaving no room for argument. "And let me be clear, young man, we have a zero-tolerance policy for any form of tobacco or its look-alike. That includes shredded beef jerky or any other creative attempts to circumvent the rules. Absolutely no spitting is permitted on campus grounds, at any time. Before school, during school, or after the final bell has rung, you will respect these grounds and conduct yourself appropriately."

I felt my face grow warm under her unwavering stare. It was as if she could see right through me, as if she knew of my past transgressions and was issuing a direct warning. My heart pounded in my chest, and I wondered if she could hear it, sense my unease. Midway High felt less like a school and more like a fortress, with Mrs. Humphrey as its formidable gatekeeper. I had the distinct feeling that she missed nothing and that her rules were not to be taken lightly. The weight of her expectations and the school's legacy bore down on me.

I stood there, feeling smaller by the second, and wondered what I had gotten myself into. Stacy's warnings echoed in my mind, and I knew that my time at Midway High would be anything but ordinary. As I stood there, I realized my journey had just begun, and I had a feeling that the rules and traditions of this school would shape my future in ways I couldn't even imagine.

" Do you agree to the rules here at Midway High, Mr. Villarreal?" Mrs. Humphrey staring at me. I straightened my posture, meeting Mrs. Humphrey's intense gaze. "Yes, ma'am," I said, my voice steady. "My parents raised me right. I was trained to fight, but I can assure you, I'm a lover, not a fighter." Her eyes flickered with something indiscernible, but her expression remained stern. She gave me a professional nod and handed me my schedule and a map. "Good. Well, young sir, enjoy your new campus. If you have any concerns about your classes, my door is always open. It looks like your first class is English with Mrs. Barnes. Follow the instructions on the map, and you'll find it."

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The map was nothing but a cruel joke, taunting me with its impossible paths and endless twists. This school, a monstrous maze of brick and concrete, towered over me, a daunting challenge that made my small-town high school seem like a mere ant hill. Every step I took echoed through the empty halls, a constant reminder of my overwhelming sense of being lost. The map I clutched in my trembling hand was useless, a mere scrap of paper against this behemoth of a building. I felt adrift, a tiny boat in a vast sea of unfamiliarity, the pressure of it all suffocating me.

My heart raced as I frantically searched for any familiar landmarks, any sign that I was on the right track. But the more I searched, the more the walls closed in, the more the unfamiliarity squeezed me like a vice. Fear and panic gripped me, and I couldn't shake the feeling that I was just a pawn in this elaborate game of chaos. Who were the architects of this madness? Where were the other players? And most importantly, how would I ever escape this labyrinth?

Then, someone hit me from behind, hitting me and dropping a book. "I'm extremely sorry. I shouldn't be stopped in the middle of the hall." I said as I picked up the book on the floor.

As I stood up to offer yet another apology, the guy walking this morning was standing in front of me. He was leisurely strolling, a book in hand, fully immersed in its contents. Our eyes met, and I found myself frozen in place. "Hey, hi..." I stuttered out before trailing off, simply gazing at him. I had never been drawn to men before, but for some inexplicable reason, my stomach was aflutter, and my body was experiencing a plethora of unfamiliar sensations.

"Sorry," he said, his smile widening, and he continued. My brain seemed on fire. I couldn't think of anything to say. This was supposed to be the day I was going to shed my old skin, be a new Marty in a new place, but all I felt was this unsettling mix of attraction and anxiety.

"Wait!" I blurted, then realized I was yelling. He stopped, a flicker of surprise in his eyes." Do you... know where room 206 is?" I managed.

He nodded, "Yeah, that's where I'm headed. Follow me."

His voice was like a warm melody. My ears were glued to every syllable. He led me through a maze of corridors, and I was silent, lost in the way the sunlight streamed through the windows, illuminating his hair, a shade of deep brown that I could get lost in. We arrived at a room bustling with students, the air thick with the smell of paper and nervous excitement.

There were only two desks left, one behind the other.

He took the one in front. "Hey, um..." I started, my voice cracking as I tried to whisper. "Thanks." He just nodded as like he was saying, "No problem."

"Good to see you two finally made it to class," Mrs. Barnes said, with a hint of authority in her tone. I raised my hand. "Good morning, Mrs. Barnes. I'm new here. Marty Villarreal is my name. Being new, I was lost, and the map was not doing any justice. I apologize for being tardy." The classroom, except for the guy I came in with, chuckled.

"Mr. Villarreal, is it?" the teacher said, as I nodded in agreement. " Do show me the way you were holding your map." I pulled the paper from my new school mandated binder, and immediately embarrassment hit me as I realized I was holding the map wrong, "I-um- I was holding the map wrong, I didn't read the directions on top of the page."

Mrs. Barnes smiled, "Be sure to read the directions on everything I give out Mr. Villarreal."

"Yes, ma'am"

I brought my attention to the guy's back, but when I do, I notice he is turned around slightly looking at me. I see him flash a dimple and a smirk. Why was I so drawn to him, a guy I'd only seen for a few minutes? He was so close, I could practically smell the scent of his cologne, something fresh and clean. I spent the entire class looking at the back of the guy. I was planning to ask him what his name was.

*DING DING DING DING DING*

The bell to signal class was over rang loud overhead. "Have a good rest of the day class. See you tomorrow." Mrs. Barnes said at the door to the hall. I stood up to gather my things and stretch. He barely spoke or acknowledged me as he silently collected his papers.

"You two boys stay put please," she said as she pointed to us. I was sure she wanted to warn us not to be tardy any more, and sure things it was. "I won't allow tardiness in my class, gentlemen. I understand it's early in the morning but understand that if I must be here early and on time, then you should be here ready to learn. Next time you are tardy, you would need to go to the front office and get a tardy slip. Do I make myself clear?" Mrs. Barnes smiled at us and released us.

As soon as she released us, the guy was rushing out the door. I watched him disappear down the hall, a lone figure against the throngs of students. "Wait!" I wanted to yell, but he was gone.

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Asking a few individuals and consulting my map, I eventually located my second period class with relative ease. Upon entering the room, an overpowering stench of formaldehyde struck me like a blow to the face, showing that I had indeed arrived at my biology class. Taking a seat at one of the spacious science tables, equipped with four microscopes, I noticed two other students sitting across from me, a boy, and a girl, in a relationship based on their constant laughter and flirtatious gestures. Despite the teacher's back turned, they would steal kisses at each other's lips.

As I watched them, memories of my girlfriend back in Ashburn came to mind. She had texted me on my way to second period, and I couldn't help but take out my phone to read her message. "Have a wonderful day at school, Marty-Poo," Sarah had typed, accompanied by a smiley face. I responded with a rose emoji and a simple "You too, Sarah-Boo!" It had only been a month since we got together, shortly after I moved from Ashburn to Grand Valley. She seemed like the perfect match for me, wanting the same things in life, like children in the future. But as an eighteen-year-old, with my birthday approaching in three months, I questioned whether I genuinely loved her or if I was just infatuated with who she was. There was a nagging feeling in the back of my mind, something about a mysterious guy and the emotions I was experiencing. My parents had always taught me to see everyone as equals, regardless of age, race, sexual orientation, or beliefs. So, I know if I told them I was gay they wouldn't care. They instilled in me the value of empathy and never causing harm to anyone or anything, except for roaches, fleas, and ticks. If you want to see my dad scream, just put a tick in front of him and be prepared to cover your ears.

I slipped my phone back into my pocket and retrieved my binder and a pen, readying myself for the start of class. As the bell rang, I noticed the seat next to me was unoccupied. Mr. Ford began his lecture on chemical and microscope safety. Amidst the lesson, the door opened, but I paid little attention as the couple in front of me seemed to engage in some questionable behavior. Mr. Ford reminded us, "It's better to be early than late." I turned to see the source of the interruption, only to find the culprit's cheeks flushed with embarrassment. "I apologize, there was a last-minute schedule change," he explained. As he scanned the room, our eyes met. A slight lopsided smile grew with his dimples slowing becoming visible. Those butterflies that appeared before first period started up again.

Mystery guy walked up to me and asked softly, "Is it okay if I sit here?" I looked at him in complete awe, and I couldn't remember how to speak. I shook my head answering the question my head was asking 'Am I dreaming?' Before I could snap out of it, the mystery guy saw the answer I was asking myself. "Oh okay, sorry." he left with his head down, like a dog with its tail between their legs. I stood up from the stool, "No, I mean yes, you can sit here!" I declared as Mr. Ford snapped around, "Do we have a problem over there, gentlemen?" I blush and mystery guy sat down next to me. Both faces are red.

Even though we talked a bit more, he feared me. As soon as the bell rang for second period to let out. He ran straight out to the hall and vanished like he didn't even exist.

CHAPTER THREE

For my third period, I had a free block that was like a homeroom class. The teacher said we could use this time to study, play on our phones, or do anything else. It wasn’t too bad, except for the rule that we couldn’t leave campus. So, I opted to go to the library and peruse the school yearbooks. As I flipped through the pages, my mind couldn’t help but wander to the enigmatic guy. He always seemed on edge, like something had happened to him. I couldn’t shake the feeling that he was struggling with something, as even the smallest things affected him deeply.

As I gathered my things to prepare for my next class, he walked into the library and returned the same book he had this morning. Our eyes met briefly as I waved at him, but he quickly scurried away. I followed his path to the return bin and picked up the book, feeling a flutter of butterflies in my stomach. The title, “When to Ask for Help: Ending is Never the Answer” by an Anonymous Author, made me worry. As I flipped through the pages, a tear formed at the corner of my eye. My heart ached, hoping that he wasn’t planning to hurt himself. I barely knew him, but the thought of him not being here anymore was weighing heavily on me.

The pull towards him, the unknown force that drew me in, felt even stronger than when I first saw him walking. I didn’t want to overstep my boundaries, as I didn’t know him well, but I remembered being taught to report any signs of distress. I placed the book back in the return bin and made my decision to visit the counselor’s office. As I became more familiar with the school map, I knew where to go, but the annoying bell interrupted, signaling the end of the free block and the start of my fourth period.

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I walk into my fourth period classroom, and the teacher had world maps of colonial trading routes, pictures of the past presidents of the United States along the wall edge the ceiling. Suddenly I hear, "Oh my god! No Way!" I spin around to the door and Stacy was looking at me like she hadn’t seen me in years. Immediately, I knew this class was going to be interesting. We sit side by side in the row of students' desks, and listen to Mr. Henderson syllabus speech and what to expect this year in class. All I could think about was the book, mystery guy, and wanting to help him.

The end of fourth period bell shrieked a cacophony of metal and echo that felt like a sigh of relief that I knew lunch was approaching. I’d finally escaped the confines of Mr. Henderson’s history lecture, and Stacy was waiting by my locker.

"Lunch?" she asked, her smile brighter than the sunbeams filtering through the window.

“Sounds perfect,” I replied, the word catching in my throat. For a moment, I felt the weight of the morning’s encounter with the stranger. It was as if a silent plea had been uttered, a plea I wasn’t sure I’d understood.

“You’re quiet,” Stacy observed, her voice a gentle hum.

I shrugged. "Thinking." As I slammed my locker shut and twisted the combination dial. "What are you thinking about?" She asked. She saw that something was bugging me, "Marty, I barely know you, but I can see us being besties, so don't make me punch it out of you." I laughed at her statement.

"There's this guy I saw this morning while I was driving to school, and I have him in two classes so far, and I'm drawn to him like I need to know him. Have you ever had that feeling someone is meant to be in your life?" I asked.

Stacy looks and me with sad eyes now, "This is bullshit. Why are all the hot guys gay? Ugh! I knew I sensed Brokeback Mountain vibes going on!" She slaps my arm.

"You think I'm gay! Ha! I'm not gay!" I laughed and scoffed.

"Truth is, I need to talk to the counselor about something he was reading when I ran into him in the hall, and the same book he returned to the library bin." I looked down at the table.

"What, what was the book?" Stacy asked me.

"When to Ask for help: Ending is Never the Answer" I told her.

"Like a never quit your project type of book or like ending life?" she asks me without sounding cruel about it.

"I could only skim a few pages of the book, but it was about suicide - Stac," my voice faltered, and my throat tightened. The thought of him not being alive was unfathomable, and I had never encountered someone close to me contemplating suicide. This feeling weighed heavily on me, and I struggled to understand why I cared so much. I didn't even know him. Yet, it seemed only natural to feel compassion for a fellow human being who believes that ending their life solves all their problems.

As we walked towards my truck, the weight of the world seemed to settle on my shoulders. It wasn’t just the weight of the upcoming exams, the looming shadow of graduation. It was a weight that came from somewhere deeper, a feeling I couldn’t quite grasp. Like the fact this guy might not want to live that long to even accomplish those things. I need to get to know him. I can stop this and be friends with him. Show him that life isn't bad. However, I don't know his life, his story, his problems. I know one thing. I want to know him.

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Stacy closing the passenger door. “Let’s go to the ‘Burger Joint,’ it’s where most juniors and seniors who have vehicles go too for lunch.” She snapped her seat buckle close and proceeded as she gave me directions. It turns out it was super easy to find. Just pass a traffic light and it's right on the side of the county road the school is on.

As I put my truck in park and took off my seat belt. “You weren’t kidding about the name of the place. Seems like the owners had little time to come up with something original.”

“Well, at one point it was called ‘Hooter’s Burger Palace' but animal right activists protested for a name change, then it became ‘Dick’s Burgers’ but the owner tired of the immaturity levels of those who kept vandalizing the place by blacking out the ‘S’ or drawing insanely accurate detailed penises everywhere.” She said, leaning on the hood of the truck.

“Seriously, animal rights activists?” I chuckled and ignoring the penis explanation.

I held the door open for her, while she was telling me what’s good here. After placing our order, we grabbed our drinks from the pop fountain. Fastest service I have ever seen at a burger place. By the time we sat down at an open table, the food was delivered.

“So, what’s the plan after graduation?” Stacy asked, her eyes sparkling with excitement, trying to get my mind off things with the mystery guy.

“Not sure,” I replied, taking a bite of my burger. “College. Or just a break.” The future stretched before me like a vast, uncharted ocean. I wasn’t sure I was ready to set sail.

“I’m going to ASU,” Stacy declared, her voice filled with conviction. "I’m going to be a journalist." Her dream felt so real, so tangible. My future felt like a blurry reflection, an undefined shape on a foggy window.

Stacy is looking out the window, "What's his name? The one with the book."

Has she noticed I started thinking about him again? "Umm, I'm not sure, he sat next to me in the first two classes of the day, but we haven't exchanged much conversations with being late the first class, and he was late because of a schedule change for second period." I look at her with worry in my eyes.

"I think he's new, though. I was in the library during block the third period, looking at last year's yearbook, but he wasn't in it." I told her while eating a French fry.

Stacy furrowed her brow. "You mean the one with the dark hair, sharp blue eyes with a mysterious air?"

“Yeah, him,” I replied, my gaze wandering towards the window, trying to hold my excitement.

“I have him in my block period. He is a new kid, quiet, smart as a whip. And a little too interested in the intricacies of the human psyche,” Stacy quipped, "because he had another book with him, he was reading the first half of the block about victims of abuse."

I felt my hands clench solid just from the thought someone may have hurt him before causing the suicidal thoughts, and Stacy sees balling my fist. "You okay Mar-Tar?"

"Mar-Tar? You are going to have to think of something better." I smiled and chuckled at it.

"I'm going to have to come up with something if we are going to be besties, am I right?" Stacy says with a giggle.

I just nod with a smirk. As we get up from the table to throw away our trash, I ask her, "What do girls feel when they think a guy is cute?" Her eyes snapped straight to mine, and with a straight face, "Pregnant." I threw my napkin at her and asked her to be serious.

"For me I get butterflies in my stomach, and I can't talk. Why, what do you feel when you find a guy cute?" She smirked like she was waiting for another napkin to be thrown at her. "Marty, you should know this if we are going to be besties. I don't care if you are straight, gay, or bi, just be yourself. Oh, and if you turn gay try to leave to some guys for me, because this," she is circling her finger to capture what I look like, "will definitely be hard to compete with trying to get guys to stay straight because you are fine as hell, my dear newest bestie ever."

I laughed and held the door open to walk out. She interlocks her arm in mine, and we walk to my truck.

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We drove back to school, the familiar sights of the parking lot a comforting sight. But the moment we stepped out of the truck, my heart sank. The mysterious guy was sitting beneath the giant oak tree, a lone figure in a sea of students. I point to him and Stacy follows finger's direction. "I see why you think he's cute, and you two would make the hottest damn couple ever!"

"I'm not gay Stacy! I don't think he's cute!" I slam my truck door.

"Keep telling yourself that stud, I know the signs and symptoms of love and I am diagnosing you as my new gay bestie." She declared as she stepped on the sidewalk.

"I'm not gay if you keep saying it then we won’t be besties," I smirked.

Truth is I find him attractive, but I never found a guy attractive before, so this is new for sure. We walked to the tree where Mystery guy was sitting;, he had his lunch near him, and he was watching something on his phone.

The moment he saw us approaching, he jumped up, leaves clinging to his clothes, a look of startled fear in his eyes. "Hey," Stacy and I said in unison, our voices echoing with a mix of surprise and concern.

"I'm Marty," I added, "we have first and second period class together". extending my hand. Stacy followed suit, introducing herself.

The enigmatic man simply gazed at us. His eyes widened and his lips barely twitched in an attempt at a smile. He resembled a startled deer, frozen in the glare of headlights. Beads of sweat formed on his forehead as he grappled with whether to fight or flee.

"Hey," I said, my voice gentler this time. "We didn't mean to scare you. I just wanted to say thank you for... for this morning, you know, taking me to first period and I wanted to apologies for second period." I slid my hand behind my neck, "I must have had too much coffee or something." God knows, I don't drink coffee.

"Oh right,” he mumbled, his voice barely a whisper, “No problem."

"Do you want to come with us to hang out at a coffee shop near town after school today?" Stacy calmly asked, hoping for a satisfactory answer.

He turned abruptly and walked back to the school building, disappearing into the throng of students. Stacy and I just stood there, watching him go, a wave of confusion washing over us.

"What was that all about?" Stacy finally asked, her voice filled with disbelief.

"I have no idea," I said, my words lost in the echo of the silence.

The rest of the day passed by in a hazy blur. Eventually, I made my way to the counselor’s office and disclosed my encounter with the enigmatic stranger. They commended my conscientiousness in adhering to their "See Something, Say Something" protocol. Despite my lack of knowledge about the mystery guy's identity, they assured me they would thoroughly investigate the matter.

The final bell felt like a distant, echoing sound, lost in the swirl of confusion and unease. As I walked into the classroom for the final period, I noticed the mysterious guy sitting in the desk with an empty desk behind him in the back row.

As I took the seat behind him, I felt a strange pull towards him, a magnetic force that was both intriguing and terrifying. This strange encounter had left a mark on me, a question that burrowed into my thoughts like a seed, taking root and demanding an answer. Who was this guy? And why did he seem so… different?

The final bell finally rang, a jarring sound that brought me back to reality. As I walked out of the classroom, I felt a cold shiver run down my spine. Something was terribly wrong, a dissonance in the universe, a sense of impending chaos that I couldn't shake off. The mystery guy, with his unsettling demeanor and his hidden knowledge, had become a symbol of this unspoken fear.

I walked out of the school, the sun setting on the horizon, casting long, ominous shadows on the ground. The world felt different, more fragile, as if the thin membrane separating reality from something else had grown thinner, more porous.

And as I drove home, I couldn't shake the feeling that something profound had happened, something that caused him to harm himself.

CHAPTER FOUR

A protein bar was sticking to the roof of my mouth, the way it always did. Mom was staring at me like I'd grown a second head.

"So, you're telling me your day was… normal?" she asked, her voice dripping with skepticism.

"Yeah, totally normal," I mumbled, swallowing the sticky protein bar. "Just the usual… class, lunch, boring stuff." I didn't mention the guy with the unsettlingly intense stare, the one who seemed to vanish. It felt like something from a bad dream, a glitch in the matrix. “You know you can talk to me Marty,” Mom’s face showed signs of concern, “I’ve had my fair share of first day troubles back in my day, being an army brat because of your grandfather being stationed somewhere new every other year.” I gave my mom a quick smile before saying, “I know Momma, but it was normal.”

*Far from normal!* I thought to myself.

The doorbell rang, and Mom let out a triumphant shriek.

"Marty, Sarah's competition is here!” Dad yelled from the front door, “She wants to know if you will go to prom with her!” Dad’s laugh rose,” I also give you permission to marry this one right now because she’s prettier than the other one.”

*Competition? Prom? Marry...What?!*

My stomach lurched. Why was Dad being so dramatic about this? I shot up from my chair, a sense of dread settling in my chest. I knew this would not be good.

Except it wasn't Sarah's competition. It was Stacy. She was laughing and smiling with her hand over her eyes looking embarrassed. “Dad c’mon! That’s Stacy... Mr. and Mrs. Ramos’ daughter from next door,” chuckling at the sight of Stacy being embarrassed.

“Well, let me get my shoes on and I’ll go see if they will go 50/50 on the wedding, and we can host it here in the backyard this weekend.” Dad says as Mom slaps him across the back of the head. “What! They will make beautiful grand babies, don’t you think?!”

“DAD!” I say in shock.

“THEODORE WAYNE VILLARREAL!” Mom says with shame and embarrassment. “Shit! I’m in trouble. Nice to meet you, Stacy. Marty will tell you my funeral details later this evening.” Dad rushes into the kitchen with my mom following behind him with a rolled-up newspaper smacking him.

"Hey, Marty," she said, laughing with rosy cheeks. “Your folks seem fun to live with.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry about that. My pops can be over the top sometimes.” Sighing as I’m looking down at my shoes and shaking my head.

“It’s okay, I just wanted to see if you wanted to go hangout and go to the mall?” Stacy is still giggling from my parents.

“Yeah sure, I need to figure out my way around here anyway, do you mind waiting on the couch so I can go change really quick?” I gestured to the living room.

“Sure!” as she stepped into the house.

I ran upstairs to change, but I really didn’t know what I was changing because most of my clothes were plain shirts or button up western shirts. I took my FFA shirt off and went to my closet, picking out my favorite blue and white western shirt. I rushed, buttoning it up and tucking it into my pants. I grabbed my light gray Stetson and hurried back to the living room because my dad was talking to Stacy again.

As I landed on the bottom step, Stacy cat whistled at me. “You know we aren’t going on a date, right?” I blushed and said, “This is what I normally wear. I feel weird when I wear shorts.” Stacy looks at my dad as he shrugs. “It’s true. I don’t know where he gets his cowboy spirit from, but it wasn’t from me, that’s for damn sure.”

“Be back later, pops!” I followed behind Stacy out the door. Before I shut the door, “Be sure you wear protection, education first then babies!” dad yells at us, and “THEODORE!” mom screams. Dad chuckles as a stern look “Love you Kiddo, be safe!” then a manly “OUCH!” I guess mom got her last word in the form of physical contact.

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We drove to the mall; any mall always made me feel claustrophobic and overwhelmed. But Stacy was in her element, flitting from store to store like a hummingbird.

"I'm just going to browse really quick," she said, as she’s at the entrance of a female underwear store. "You can come with me if you want, or you can stay out here. I already know what I am going to buy."

“Umm... I will just stay out here.” Looking around with embarrassment and planting my feet just outside the doors, out of the way.

Ten slow, agonizing minutes later, Stacy came running back, her eyes lit up with excitement. "Marty, we need to go to the sporting store!" she said, her voice full of enthusiasm. "The cashier was telling me that Smart Sport is having a sale on sports bras.” Stacy grabs my hand and pulls me, dodging people left and right so we couldn't get lost in the horde of slow walking window shoppers.

We were halfway out the door of the truck when I spotted him. The mystery guy, the one with the haunting eyes and the unsettling presence. He was sitting in a coffee shop across the street, surrounded by friends. He was laughing, a full, genuine laugh that seemed incongruous with the way he had looked at me at school.

"Look Stacy" I whispered to Stacy, pointing to the mystery guy. "Should we go say I?"

Stacy grinned, her face lighting up. "He’s got a great smile and dimples. I'm glad he talks and laughs. We should go over and say hi again? Pretend to get coffee and try not to spook him this time.”

My heart sank. This was a disaster waiting to happen. We were about to walk into another one of life’s bizarre, random encounters. I was powerless to stop it.

We took a few steps, and the laughter stopped. The mystery guy spotted us, his smile fading into a look of recognition. He stood up and headed back inside the coffee shop, leaving Stacy and I stranded in the parking lot, being judged by the mystery guy's posse.

"Well, this was awkward," Stacy said, her voice laced with disappointment. "I guess he’s not really that interested in meeting us."

I just nodded, not really knowing what to say. We turned and walked into the sporting goods store, the absurdity of the situation settling in my stomach like a lead weight.

The world seemed to have transformed into a surreal dreamscape. The sporting goods store had become a bizarre, distorted reality. As we walked through the aisles, it was like a scene from a film noir, except instead of shadows, the world was filled with the overpowering smell of leather and hunting gear.

"Do you feel like we are being watched?" Stacy asked, her voice a nervous whisper as she nodded toward a random guy who obviously sucked at following people. For one, he was in the women’s leggings section and every time I glanced up, his glance shot down at more leggings.

"No, you’re just being paranoid," I replied, trying to convince myself as much as her. I really didn't want to move again if this guy was here for other business involving my parents.

But Stacy was right. We were being followed. By one of the mystery guy’s friends, after I got a better look at the stalker's face. He was trailing us through the store, keeping a discreet distance. I could feel his laser eyes burning a hole through me.

I tried to ignore him, but the sensation of being watched became unbearable. I was about to text my parents, but I needed to assess the situation first before I become the 'boy who cried wolf.' Drawing any unnecessary attention would warrant having to explain our family's situation. The guy's eyes felt like a spotlight was fixed on us, highlighting the absurdity of our movements. It felt like something out of a horror movie, but instead of a creepy killer, we were being pursued, much like a safari group tracks wildlife in a nature reserve in Africa.

"Okay, I think I’ve had enough of this," I said, my voice rising with a tremor of frustration. I did not know what was going on, but I had a feeling this was only going to get worse.

I stealthily turned and crouched down, concealing myself from the stalker's view. With a swift motion, I rose, ensuring that the stalker was still unaware of my presence. Each time I emerged; I observed the man frantically scanning the area in search of me.

When I reached him, I tapped him on the shoulder. He whirled around in surprise, his eyes widening.

"Why are you following us?" I asked, my voice shaking with a mix of anger and frustration.

He just stared at me for a second, his face a mixture of shock and confusion. "I wasn't following you for the wrong purpose. Please don't hurt me," he said, his voice a low, nervous rumble. "I was just making sure you were safe."

"Safe?" I scoffed. "From what?"

"Not from what, but for who. I wanted to make sure you two weren’t some homophobic cowboy power couple," he said, his voice dropping to a barely audible whisper. "My uh… best friend is, well, he's a little skittish around new people. I was making sure you guys would not hurt him."

"What?" I blurted out, staring at him, dumbfounded. "You thought we were… homophobic?"

He nodded; his face flushed. "I know it's crazy," he said. "It's just, well, my best friend's been through a lot, and I'm overprotective."

Stacy stepped up beside me, her eyes wide with disbelief. "So, you were just making sure we would not attack your friend?" she asked, her voice dripping with a mixture of amusement and disbelief. "That’s your theory?"

"Sorry," he said, his voice dropping even lower. "I was just… worried." He looked at the floor, then back up at us. "My friend is named Tyler. He told me you two kept trying to talk to him at your school. He's also the one who fled at the coffee shop just outside. He's sweet, but he gets scared easily. I'm just… overprotective."

He sighed, then shrugged. "I’m sorry for stalking you," he said, his voice laced with embarrassment. "I'll just… go now. See you around." He turned and hurried out of the store, leaving us standing there, speechless.

We just stared at each other for a moment, unsure of what to say. This whole experience felt like something from a fever dream, a bizarre and illogical chain of events.

"Well, that was… weird," Stacy finally said, shaking her head.

"I’m not sure I’ve ever been more confused in my life," I confessed, my voice weary.

"I know what you mean," Stacy said, her face still etched with a look of disbelief. "It's like we just stepped into a scene from a bad movie."

We walked back to my truck, the absurdity of the situation hanging over us like a dark cloud. The world felt unreal, a twisted and warped reflection of reality.

"So, what now?" Stacy asked, her voice still filled with a mixture of amusement and disbelief.

"I think we just go home," I said, feeling drained. "I think we need some time to process all of this."

Stacy nodded in agreement. We climbed into the truck, and I drove us back to my house. The rest of the day was a blur, and I couldn’t shake the feeling of being watched, even after I had laid down in bed. The eerie sensation was relieved by the revelation that I now had knowledge of the enigmatic boy's identity...Tyler. As I turned onto my side, placing my arm under the pillow; I closed my eyes and with a soft smile… “Goodnight, Tyler.”

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The next day at school, I couldn’t help but keep an eye out for Tyler. Hoping to see him, he has been taking residence in my head. That he has friends that stalk to protect him made me even more intrigued. Which made me concerned about my own feelings toward Tyler. Why am I so drawn to him? Why do I get these butterflies when I spot him close or in the halls? Reflecting on our interaction with the creepy guy from yesterday, could it be possible that Tyler was gay? I did not want to assume anything, thou.

"Good morning, Marty," Stacy chirped, as she approached my locker. Holding out a chocolate and peanut butter protein bar.

"Hey, Stacy," I replied grabbing the bar, feeling a strange mix of anticipation and dread.

I nudged the lockers, and we proceeded towards the English Hall, but as we walked, I suddenly halted and gestured to Stacy with a downward-pointing finger as Tyler appeared. He entered the hallway, his gaze sweeping through the crowd. Upon spotting us, a mixture of relief and embarrassment lit up his face. Stacy whispered to me, "What's gotten into you?" I stood frozen, my eyes glued to this unfamiliar version of Tyler, while Stacy quipped, "Close your mouth before a fly lands on your tongue." Her light laughter snapped me out of my Tyler-induced trance.

His voice trembled with nerves as he spoke. "Hey. I’m sorry for the stalker incident. I did not know my brother was going to do that." Stacy and I exchanged a confused look. "Brother?" we both asked simultaneously.

"Yeah, he tells everyone new in public that he’s my best friend. It’s throwing off strangers in case of..." Tyler trailed off, his voice filled with fear. "Never mind, I'm sorry again." And just like that, Tyler withdrew and quickly left down the hall.

"Could he possibly be enrolled in that police program? What's it called?" Stacy snaps her fingers, trying to recall. "Witness Protection?" I glance at her, my expression betraying my shock. "Yes, that's the one!" She studies me, puzzled by my reaction. I need to compose myself before she questions my sexuality again, or perhaps I should take some time to understand myself.

As we make our way back to class, I silently project a thought towards the path Tyler ran off on, wishing him a good day. I can't help but wonder if he possesses telepathic abilities and can pick up on my thoughts, perhaps even responding with a sign or message of gratitude. It's possible that I have formed a strong, intimate connection with him, but does that automatically label me as gay, bisexual, or is it simply a onetime occurrence, like a divine test?

CHAPTER FIVE

Two weeks had passed, and Tyler, the mystery guy I now knew by name, seemed to thaw. We had had little of a conversation. Whenever it was just us two, my throat would tighten, and words would desert me. I was too shy or too scared, too afraid to say anything that might frighten him away. Stacy had been a whirlwind of encouragement, pushing me to talk to him, to be myself. She’s been giving me glances when Tyler comes near me or when I am trying to not speak gibberish in front of him. She would always smirk and shake her head.

One day after school, we were at the local library, surrounded by the comforting smell of old books and the soft rustling of pages being turned. "Stacy," I began, my voice trembling slightly. "I’ve been thinking about Sarah and… I feel like we’re drifting apart."

“I get that,” Stacy replied, her tone earnestly. “Long distance can be tough. But you know I'm here for you, no matter what.”

Taking a deep breath, I continued. "It’s just hard. Breaking up feels like the last resort, but I can’t shake this feeling of heaviness."

Stacy nodded, her eyes reflecting understanding. "Have you talked to her about how you feel?"

“I haven’t yet. I’m scared, Stac. What if I hurt her?”

“Sometimes honesty is the best way forward,” she encouraged gently. “But can I ask you something personal?” I gazed at her with a bewildered expression. "It's against the rules for my best friend to inquire about my private affairs," I chuckled and added, "But of course, you may."

“What about Tyler.” Stacy bit her lip, searching for the right words. “I just want you to know it’s totally okay if you have feelings for him. I mean, you can’t really help who your heart… falls for, right?”

“I don’t have feelings for Tyler!” I snapped; the tension palpable. She watched as I stood up abruptly, frustration written all over my face. "I'm leaving."

“Marty, wait!” Stacy called, as I heard her chair scooting back. “You can’t just—”

As she caught up to me, she noticed my eyes glistening, a tear threatening to spill. “Why are you crying?” she pressed, concern lacing her tone.

“I... I don’t know,” I admitted, my facade crumbling. “I’ve never felt this way about a guy before. It just happened the first day I saw him—walking to school. It’s like I was drawn to him.”

Stacy gently placed a hand on my shoulder. “Marty, it’s okay. You’re not alone in this.”

Stacy let out a shaky laugh. “You know the last time I saw a cowboy cry was in ‘Brokeback Mountain’.”

“You’re evil, you know that” I chuckled as I wiped away a tear from my cheek.

Stacy pulled me into a hug. “But seriously, support your heart. Just be yourself, okay?”

I squeezed her into a bear hug and thanked her. She grabbed my forearms and had this beautiful smile and then a smirk, “Meet me at Venti Surplus in one hour, okay, I have a surprise for you!” I gave her a puzzled look and, still sniffling, “Okay? Should I be scared?”

She pulled me into another hug and gave me a quick peck on the cheek. “Just trust me, okay?” I nodded, “Okay.”

Stacy jumped into her car and sped away.

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I reached the Venti Surplus Coffee Shop with Stacy's arrival still 20 minutes away. As I settled into our usual spot, the enticing scent of freshly roasted coffee beans enveloped me, and my attention was drawn to the man working behind the counter. Familiar from my previous encounter at the athletic store, he had followed me with an unsettling gaze. The next day at school, Tyler revealed he was his brother. His smile, more of a sneer, sent a chill down my spine.

He moved around the counter, heading toward me. I saw a name tag that said "Nick" with a rainbow pride flag pin nestled next to it. He stood before me, his eyes locking mine. His lips moved, but no sound came out. He was staring at me, intensely, with a flicker of something dangerous in his eyes.

The store doorbell signaled that someone was coming inside, and Stacy appeared with Tyler following behind her. Nick’s tense posture shifted as he saw them. He leaned down to me, his voice a low growl, "Hurt him, and you’ll go missing.” I was confused, utterly bewildered. Before I could even react, he turned and walked back to the counter.

Stacy was the first to reach our table, her face alight with a smile. She waved at me. Tyler, however, stood there, shoulders slumped, eyes glued to the floor. He glanced over his shoulder at Nick, who gave him a subtle head nod, and seemed to deflate even more.

“Hey Marty,” Stacy said, her voice brimming with cheer. “This is Tyler.” I laughed slightly. “Stacy, we already know each other…remember we go to school together?”

Tyler lifted his gaze that met my eyes, and I was taken aback by his piercing blue eyes. My throat dried instantly, and I swear a bead of sweat started with my nerves.

Nick approached our table. “Can I get you anything?” he asked.

Tyler mumbled, “My usual, please.” Stacy, ever the social butterfly, ordered a drink called an “Iced Venti Caramel Frap with Dirt.”

I looked at her, puzzled. “Dirt?”

Tyler chuckled, a sound that was both endearing and disarming. “It’s a great drink, with whipped cream and chocolate sprinkles on top.”

He looked at me, his eyes lingering for a moment, and I felt a sudden flush rise to my cheeks. He turned back to Stacy, and they started talking, oblivious to my presence.

The conversation flowed, but Tyler barely addressed me. He kept looking at Stacy, directing his answers to her questions, as if I weren’t even in the room. It was like being invisible, like my existence didn't matter.

As we prepared to leave, Tyler took a breath in, looked right into my eyes, “I saw the look on your face,” he said, his voice low. “That first day at school, when you bumped into me. I know I'm awkward around you. I'm sorry about that.”

He paused, then continued, his voice barely a whisper, “I appreciate you talking to me. I appreciate you being friendly to me.” He seemed to struggle to find the right words, his voice trembling slightly. We talked out of the shop and on our way to the vehicles. Tyler’s arm brushed up against mine, and my eyes opened wide, and heat rose into my cheeks. Tyler had curled his pinky around mine. I automatically twitched it away out of instinct. That was the worst possible thing I could do with Tyler. I tried to find his hand again, and I whispered, “I’m sorry Ty, I didn’t mean to flinch.” That brief second that I held his pinky lit up my soul.

It was too late to apologize. Tyler's face contorted as if he was in pain, his eyes wide with fear. He cried, the tears streaming down his face, and then, with a speed that was almost supernatural, he collapsed to the ground.

Stacy gasped, her hand flying to her mouth. I was there before he even touched the ground, guiding his upper body and head right into my lap. His body was rigid, his breaths shallow. I didn’t know what to do, I don’t know what had happened.

He was trembling, his eyes shut tight with terror. I held him tighter with his head buried into my chest, rubbing small circles on his back, like a mother trying to sooth her infant, whispering reassurances “It’s okay Ty, I got you, I got you, I’m sorry Ty, please forgive me for if I hurt you,” hoping that somehow my presence would calm him.

Nick stormed out of the coffee shop; his face twisted in anger. “What the hell is going on? What the FUCK did you do to my brother!?” he shouted trying to pull Tyler out of my lap, giving murderous eyes, eyes filled with heated flames, eyes that ripped every ounce of my soul out of my body. I didn’t let his brother go. “I flinched when he wrapped his pinky around mine. I panicked. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt him, I would neve—,” I started crying now, big fat tear drops rolling down my cheeks, trying to catch my breath, to the point of dry heaving. “I would never hurt him.”

Tyler, taking fuller breaths now as his brother dragged him back into the coffee shop, stopped moving his feet so Nick did too. He wiped his face with his jacket cuff. “It's fine. I'm safe, I’m sorry I made you panic Nick, I’m better, I just had a PTSD episode, and I broke down,” he looked back at me and Stacy as we were leaning on the hood of my truck.

Nick’s eyes darted to Stacy and me, a look of suspicion in them. He nodded at Tyler and said he would be inside watching.

Stacy, still bewildered, Tyler walked over to us and blushed. “May I hug both of you” wiping his nose with a tissue from his pocket this time. Stacy hugged him and whispered something into his ear. He turned to me, took a step closer than he has ever been before now. I took another half step forward and lifted his chin so I could look him directly in his eyes without him looking down. “I’m sorry Ty, I flinched out of instinct. Forgive me?” He nodded and wrapped his arms around my neck, and I wrapped him around the waist.

Ty turned and saw Nick, who was still standing just inside the door. “Can we stay until lockout?” he asked.

Nick nodded; his expression still unreadable.

We walked back inside, Tyler’s hand resting lightly on my arm. I couldn't shake the feeling that there was something more to this than what I had witnessed, something that lay beneath the surface, hidden in the shadows.

I looked at Tyler, his face pale but calm now, his eyes full of vulnerability. I knew then that this was not just a story about awkward encounters and stolen glances. There was something deeper, something darker lurking in the background. And I was determined to understand.

CHAPTER SIX

Stacy, Tyler, and I were sitting at our wooden table in the coffee shop’s corner, the aroma of burned coffee beans filling the air. Tyler was staring into his empty mug, his eyes red-rimmed, his hands trembling.

“A over a year ago, thirteenth of February,” Tyler scuffs. “My ex-boyfriend, Justin, invited me over to his house. His parents were gone, his brother was gone, so we had the house to ourselves, you know? What couple would not be happy about that? No one was going to be home until Sunday! I had the biggest smile on my face going over there because I was going to wake up on Valentine’s Day next to this amazing guy, I would get to see his bed head, kiss him with morning breath and not give a damn if it stunk. I was happy over all!”

The way Ty was recounting his memory, you could see the joy in his eyes. I thought it was just a bad breakup. I could hear in Tyler’s voice that he was getting choked up.

“We started a horror movie marathon and halfway into the second movie, Justin pauses the movie and told me that his brother bought him some wine coolers. Justin told him he was going to have a girl over and celebrate V-Day. Which I knew he was not out to anyone yet, so I was fine with it.”

Stacy was looking at me, and back to Tyler. Stacy already knew what was going to happen with this story. She wrapped her arm around mine and squeezed my hand gently; I was assuming for her comfort.

I focused on Tyler, who was still looking at his empty mug. “Ty, you do not have to tell us tonight if you want too, I know it is something personal. I do not want you to think you owe us an explanation.” Tyler looks at me and softly smiles and I knew instantly I have fallen for him, but I did not want to do anything until I broke it off with Sarah. It was only fair I do it in person.

Tyler looks back down and sighs heavily. “Justin comes back with a brown paper bag and pulls out a six-pack of wine coolers, and ten of those little whiskey shooters, and a box of condoms. Justin quickly grabbed the condoms and tossed them in the bag, saying it was a joke from his brother. I just laughed thinking that it was cute he was embarrassed. Which it was cute.”

Nick comes to the table and asks if we wanted the last of the black coffee that was still hot before he drains the pot. We all nodded and moved our cups so Nick could fill them. He grabs Tyler’s shoulder and squeezes gently.

“I was pacing myself; I knew whiskey really messes me up,” Tyler giggles. “That’s a story for another night.” Stacy and I just smile at Tyler. I am in love with dimples, I thought to myself as they vanished when Tyler keeps going on his story.

“I was already buzzing and when I looked down at the coffee table. It had appeared that he served me more than half of the ten. When I thought about it, like really thought about it. I remembered that each time he opened one and handed it to me, he was cheering but drank from the wine cooler he had barely sipped on.” Stacy gasps as she figured out what was happening. I felt my blood temperature rising and it was not from the coffee.

“I asked Justin for some water, and he said sure. He got up and got a cup for me but when he came back, he handed me orange juice instead. Telling me it would be better than water. I looked at it and, just making a joke, I had asked him if he drugged the juice. He looked at me as if I had stabbed me in the heart. He got up from the couch and started screaming at me ‘You think I’m some low life who drugs my boyfriends to get laid?!’ I apologized to him and asked for his forgiveness. I told him it was just the whiskey talking and that I knew he would not do that to me. I told him I loved him, and his eyes opened wide. He kissed me and said he loved me, too.” Tyler choked up and turned his head to wipe a tear that was sliding down his cheek. I reached for Tyler’s hand and told him he did not have to do it right now.

He looked at me and pushed on. “He said ‘It is getting late, we should go lay down, we have a big day planned tomorrow. By big, I mean lazy because I just want to hold you all day tomorrow.’ I felt a pull at my heartstrings. I had this amazing guy with me right now. So, we head to his bedroom. He took his shirt off in the hallway and pulled my shirt off for me just before his bedroom door. We were just kissing, hot kissing.”

I know I should not be, but I was getting jealous thinking about someone touching Tyler, even if it already happened.

“He led me to bed and sat down and holding me by the waist as I was standing in front of him. As he kissed my chest, he slowly moved his hands down to my pants. I pushed away from him and told him I was not comfortable doing anything but kissing. He then stood up in front of me, and said fine and started biting my neck, but he was again going to pants. This time I pulled away from and took a few steps back and told him more firmly that I said no.” Tyler looked at me and I felt the pain. If he told me right, and then that Justin touched him or raped him. I would have gone mad and killed Justin myself.

“He pushed me hard against the door screaming at me to get the fuck out of his house, that we were through, ‘You want to be the one all holy and save yourself for marriage fine get the fuck out of my house, you think you’re better me, you think you can get someone else better than me, you need me you fucking flaming ass cocksucker! Get the fuck out of my house now before I fucking throw your ass out’ Tyler grabbed some napkins and held them to his eyes.

It felt like fire was burning my skin. I could not process how someone can hurt this handsome guy; how can someone treat him like dirt? Tyler looks at both of us and says that there is more. I needed to hear this now just in case we get together. I know what his triggers are so I can calm him down. Stacy grabbed my hand, and she started tearing up and sniffling.

Tyler took a deep long breath and continued. “I walked home. Luckily, I could grab my shirt, and my phone was in my pocket. So, I called Nick to help me,” he looked over to nick who was sweeping. “When Nick drove up, I was shaking because it was getting cooler at night. I was terrified, and I have told no one I was gay, not even Nick. He pulled up and in half a second, he was out of the car, hugging me, and before he opened the passenger side door. He grabbed my face and asked, ‘Who’s the guy that did this? Where does he live?’ The only thing I did was hug him so tight I might have broken one of his ribs,” in the background we hear Nick, “Matter of fact he broke two ribs, but the family doctor said it would heal properly if I stopped hugging wild bears, and no strenuous actives for a month.” Tyler snapped his head towards Nick but before Tyler could say anything, Nick cut him off, “finish your story little bro, it healed.” All three of us chuckled.

“After the bone-crushing hug, I looked up at him in panic and all he said was, ‘Come on, you really think your brother wouldn’t know?’ I asked him why he said nothing and asked if he sees me any different now that I confirmed I was gay. He placed his hands on my shoulders, and simply asked, ‘Why should it? You’re my baby bro. I love you no matter what, and I will always protect you no matter what.’” Tyler let out a whimper and another deep sigh.

“Sunday afternoon came around and I got a text from Justin. I deleted it. An hour later, another message saying that he was sorry. He did not mean it; it was the alcohol.” I will admit that I was a naïve, stupid kid. Tyler smirks as he glances over at me.

“He sent me a text message, ‘meet me at the park tomorrow before school. I will understand if you do not show. I love you and I am terribly sorry.’ I only responded with one word, “Ditto.”

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Stacy is looking at Tyler with such a great look of concern, and I am trying to stay as neutral as possible. For one, I did not want to trigger Tyler, and second, I am trying to avoid asking Tyler with his ex is at so I can go kick his ass for hurting this amazing soul.

“At the park I arrived. It was thirty minutes before school starts. There were no other cars or any other people around. I thought it was weird at first. Usually there are 3 or 4 cars with people working out on the benches across the yard.” Tyler’s voice was a low whisper.

“I sent Justin a quick message letting him know I was there, but he did not respond, nor did he even look at the message ever to this day. I figured he was just running late and assured myself that he loved me, and he wanted to get back together.” A dreadful look took a hold of my face as Tyler looked like he was going to shell us out. I quickly took his hand and asked him if he wanted me to go sit next to him, but he shook his head and pulled his hand away.

“I was there 5 minutes when a guy I did not recognize tapped on my door, asking for directions to the nearest gas station or I could give him a ride there. He had told me he ran out of gas and was trying not to be late for work.” Tyler shakingly continued, “I told him it is half a mile back the way he came. I looked at my clock on the dashboard and was about to tell him that unfortunately I could not drive him because I was meeting someone there. When I glanced up to talk…” he lowered his head further down with him recalling the memory was leaving me heartbroken and filling my broken heart with pure anger, “the guy had drawn a guy at me. Out of fear I reached for my car keys that were still in the ignition and tried to start my car, but he shot through the glass making my ears ring, a single bullet perfectly created a small hole in the window and the projectile lodged in my steering wheel. I froze, panicked, crying because I did not know what was happening.” Tyler lets out a cry, visible tears dropping from his face as his head lowered.

“I looked at the shooter with such confusion and plead to not kill me. If he wanted money, I did not have any, but my parents did. Please, I am just a kid on my way to school. The stranger told me to get out of the car, but I was so terrified that I could not move. The shooter told me again to get out, but all I did was shake my head and kept saying please no just let me go to school.” Tyler continued with his voice trembling, “He smashed the glass, reached inside the car and dragged me out by my hair.”

I looked over at Stacy and she had napkins piled up to her nose and rubbing her eyes dry. I was in such a state of panic, not knowing what to do. I wanted to hold Tyler and stop him from shaking. I tried multiple times, but he pushed me away.

"I couldn't hear anything," he continued, his voice shaking. "My ears were ringing. Sounds muffled. I hit the ground, and he pistol-whipped me."

He rubbed his temple, the pain still clear in his eyes. "Then, these three guys came with baseball bats and a crowbar. They started smashing my car, denting it, slashing the tires. The shooter, he had me by the hair. He pulled me up and hit me again."

Tyler's voice was barely a whisper, each word a gasp of pain.

"Then, someone came up to me, and... he pissed on me. I was covered in blood, but the urine washed it away, and I could see again."

He looked at us, his eyes searching for something, for understanding, for solace.

"I saw him," Tyler whispered, his voice choked with tears. "He was standing right there, watching. I told him to run, to get help. But he just looked at me."

“Who was there?” I tried to hold my anger back.

Tyler paused, the silence that followed was deafening.

“Tyler, who was there?” I did not want to hear his ex’s name. “Was it Justin? Justin was there?” my voice was in such anger.

his voice cracking. "Yes"

Justin closed his eyes, a single tear rolling down his cheek. “I called out for him to run, for him to not get involved, just go find help.” His voice was barely audible, rocking his body back and forth with his arms across his chest. “Then everything started spinning. I was so numb from the pistol hitting me, I did not realize two of the guys came over to me and started hitting me with their bats. I could not breathe; I could not see. I just plead with Justin to go get help.”

My fists were clinched tight in balls, I felt my eyes on fire, my breathing became staggered puffs that increased rapidly as I grew angrier.

“Justin walked towards me, and I was there trying to talk to tell him no, get help, but it was just gargled incoherent fragments of voice as the guys are now kicking me in my chest and on my head. My fingers snapped back beyond their limits.” Tyler said, looking at his hands.

"Justin walked closer to me. When he stood above me, he lowered himself near my head. He just grinned, an evil demonic grin, and he whispered just loud enough for only me to hear. ‘You should have just let me fuck you, princess.’ He stood up and, like he was trying to declare his truth, he said, 'I am not a fucking fag.’ He kicked me in the head," he continued, his voice barely a whisper. "Again, and again. I remember a little after that. I just remember waking up in the hospital."

He took a deep breath, his voice filled with despair. "I had no ID. Someone found me at the park, beaten to a pulp.”

Rage stirred inside me. My blood was way past boiling now. I pushed my chair back so hard it sleds to the other wall and hit it with a thud. My breathing was labor. I am balling up my fist.

Tyler and Stacy shot up from the table. Stacy has never seen me mad; I was furious. I wanted to hurt Justin so badly right now. I turn around and scream. “Tyler, I need to know where Justin is!” I grabbed Tyler by the arm, and he winced in pain as a squeezed his upper arm. Tyler gasping in air as I am holding his arm tighter. “Marty, please let go of me. You are hurting me. Please let go. Marty, please, ow!” Stacy grabs my wrist. “Marty, this isn’t you. Please let go of Tyler’s arm. Marty babe, please let go of him.”

Tyler makes painful noises, when Nick jumps over the counter from cleaning the work area and stands in front of Tyler. He throws a punch at me toward my face, but I grab his fist before it makes contact.

Just like it started quickly and uninitialed, I snapped out of the furious rage. I let go of Tyler’s arm. My breath shaking now, quick shallow inhales. I blacked out from the rage. It was like I was there at the park. The people standing in front of me in the coffee shop were not who I saw. I was not holding on to Tyler’s arm; I was holding the shooter; I didn’t see nick throwing a punch; I saw one guy with a bat.

Nick pushes me away from Tyler, and I stumble towards a coffee table. The fear in Tyler’s eyes toward me was something I will never forget. “Tyler, I’m sorry I don’t know what happened,” I took a step closer to Tyler, “Ty I’m—”

Nick reaches his arm out towards the door, “I think you need to leave NOW!”

I nodded, Stacy hesitantly trying to decide who she is supposed to be supporting right now but ended up following me towards the door.

I stop before I push the door open, looking out towards the parking lot. “Ty, I’m sorry. Please understand, I would never hurt you; I hope you can forgive me.”

I pushed the door open and walked towards my truck. Stacy pushes her way in front of me closing my driver door with a slam. “What the fuck was that, Marty!? Huh?! Answer Me!” I dropped to the ground on my knees.

“I did not see any of you, I felt like. No, I was there at the park, as Tyler was telling us, I saw everything like I was there, I was screaming for them to stop hurting him, I was trying to run towards them, but my feet were stuck where it felt like being trapped in a tar pit. So much rage was surging out of my body, I blacked out and could not see the reality.” I broke down and cried so loud and hard.

Stacy gets me to stand up, and she is holding me as I cry into her shoulder. Minutes go by and I catch my breath. “I’m sorry Stacy, I fucked up. I am so sorry.” I lifted my head and looked at her.

“Come on, let’s get you home.” She pulls my keys out of my pocket. “You’re riding shotgun in your truck thou.” Stacy grunting trying to climb in the driver’s seat. “You can bring me after school tomorrow to pick up Nancy Drew.”

“You named your car Nancy Drew?” I asked with a chuckle. She laughed. “Hey, it’s better than Peter Rabbit,” how did she know my truck’s name like she read my mind, “Your parents told me.”

I sighed, “Of course they did.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

The sweat clung to me like a second skin, chilling as the air conditioner hummed its steady, monotonous song. My chest heaved, each breath a shallow, frantic gasp. The dream, the nightmare, was a vivid, echoing presence, its tendrils wrapping around my thoughts, squeezing the air from my lungs.

I was back at the park, the familiar scent of damp earth and blooming lilac filling my nostrils. But the vibrant green was replaced by a sickly yellow, the leaves of the trees twisting into grotesque, clawing shapes. And Tyler, his face pale and drawn, was being dragged away by something I couldn't quite see, something that felt like a shadow, like a chilling, inescapable void.

He screamed, a sound that tore through the air, raw and desperate, and I couldn't move, couldn't reach him, couldn't even speak. His eyes, wide and filled with a terror that mirrored my own, seemed to burn into my soul.

The void, the shadow, was a tangible entity, a force that drew me in, promising darkness and oblivion. But then, a voice, soft and whispery, filled my ears. Not Tyler's, no, this voice was different, filled with a strange and ancient power. It called me, beckoned me, promised an escape from the nightmare, a way to help Tyler, to save him.

It offered a deal, a chance to delve into a world beyond the ordinary, a world where I could confront the darkness, where I could face Justin and the horrors he had unleashed upon Tyler. It was a dangerous journey, a path fraught with peril, but it was a chance to fight, a chance to rewrite the story, a chance to bring back the light.

And I, filled with a desperate, frantic need to protect Tyler, accepted.

The dream, the nightmare, faded, but the voice, the offer, remained. It was a whisper in the back of my mind, a persistent, urgent pulse that thrummed beneath my skin. I knew then, with a chilling certainty, that I was no longer in control. The darkness had touched me, a suffocating weight that clung to my chest, constricting my breath. "Wake up Marty. Marty! Wake up!" My mother's voice, a lifeline in the suffocating blackness. I woke up screaming. The image of Tyler, his face contorted in agony, burned into my mind. "No! Don't hurt him! I will kill you, Justin!"

I lay gasping for breath, drenched in sweat. My mother’s arms wrapped around me, her gentle scent a beacon of calm in the storm of my nightmare. She held me close, murmuring reassurances, her touch grounding me to reality. She treated me like a child, her hand stroking my hair, a gesture that usually made me feel uncomfortable, but now I craved it, desperately needing that reassurance.

"Honey, it was a nightmare, it was a nightmare," she whispered, her voice laced with concern. "You're safe."

The nightmare, however, left a residue of fear, an unnerving unease that lingered. The image of Tyler, his terrified eyes staring back at me, haunted my thoughts. It wasn’t just a nightmare. It felt… real.

My mother, ever perceptive, sensed my lingering fear. "Are you okay, Marty?" she asked, her voice soft but steady.

"I'm fine now, thank you, Mom." I managed to put on a weak smile, trying to convince myself as much as her.

She stepped back; her gaze lingering on me, searching. Before leaving, she turned, her expression curious. "Marty, who's Tyler?"

The question caught me off guard. I felt a surge of panic, my heart thudding against my ribs. "He's just a friend from school," I mumbled, my voice betraying my unease.

My mother nodded, her gaze still searching, her lips pressed together in a thin line. "He must be a special friend if you're willing to kill someone for him." She then turned and left, leaving me alone with the unsettling echo of her words and the lingering fear from the nightmare.

I lay back, my thoughts racing. Did I say anything about Tyler in my nightmare? My mind was a blur, the events of the dream fragmented, but there was a chilling certainty–I had seen Tyler in danger, and I had felt an overwhelming urge to protect him, even if it meant resorting to violence.

How much did my mother hear? How much did she understand? The question hung heavy in the air, as heavy as the darkness that had enveloped me in my sleep. The line between reality and dream had blurred, and the fear that had invaded my sleep now seemed to have a life of its own, a creeping tendril of dread that threatened to engulf me.

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The pre-dawn darkness clung to the parking lot like a shroud. I pulled in, the headlights momentarily illuminating the rows of cars before fading into the black canvas. It was a familiar routine, a silent ritual I’d enacted countless times before. My feet hit the pavement, the asphalt cold against my bare skin. The air was crisp, tasting of dew and possibility. As I walked towards the track, I felt a familiar tension in my chest, a knot of anxiety that I’d learned to live with, to expect. The rhythmic thump of my heartbeat resonated against the silence.

Reaching the track, I placed my earbuds in, the music a dull, distant hum. The familiar routine provided a thin veneer of normalcy over the churning storm within me. With the first stride, I felt the familiar release of the endorphins, the burn in my lungs, the ache in my muscles. My body, a tireless engine, pushed me forward, every step a testament to the control I desperately sought. But the guilt, like a tenacious shadow, followed me. Every breath, a reminder of the pain I had inflicted.

"Just let go," I whispered, my voice lost in the wind. "Let go of the control, let go of the guilt."

I pushed myself harder, the familiar ache in my legs morphing into a searing fire. My lungs screamed for respite, but I ignored them, my focus narrowed to the rhythmic pounding of my feet. I pushed until I couldn't anymore, collapsing onto the track, my breath ragged and shallow. The world around me dissolved into a blurry, swirling vortex of exhaustion and self-loathing.

The faint, distant rumble of the school awakening pulled me back to reality. I stumbled to my feet; the weight of my actions heavy on my shoulders. The gymnasium doors were open, the scent of chlorine and sweat a familiar balm to my aching muscles.

Under the harsh glare of the shower, I stood, the water pounding my back, a futile attempt to wash away the weight of my actions. The guilt, a constant companion, felt like a physical presence, a weight pressing down on me. Tyler's face, his eyes wide with fear and betrayal, haunted me. I hated myself, hated the way my actions had shattered his trust. I hated the fear in his eyes, a reflection of the fear that now consumed me.

"I wish I could just disappear," I murmured, the words lost in the echoing roar of the water.

The steam from the shower swirled around me, a fleeting, ethereal apparition. Suddenly, the drain, a cold, unyielding metal maw, shifted. The edges of the grate quivered a metallic shudder that rippled across its surface. It seemed to breathe, a sinister, pulsating life of its own.

“Please," I whispered; my voice hoarse with desperation. "Just let me go, take me away, take it all away."

A low, rumbling growl emanated from the drain, a sound that resonated deep within my soul. A swirling vortex, a maelstrom of darkness, formed within the drain, growing in intensity, threatening to engulf everything in its path. It was a force I’d never encountered before, a primal entity that whispered of oblivion and escape. It beckoned me, offering a promise of release from the torment that consumed me.

I looked at the swirling abyss, the promise of oblivion seductive, yet terrifying. But my heart, despite the fear that constricted my chest, whispered a different message. A whisper of responsibility, of redemption. I was not meant for oblivion; I was meant to face the consequences of my actions, to right the wrongs I’d committed.

I took a step back from the drain, the swirling darkness receding as I did. The monster retreated, the metal maw slowly closing, leaving behind a faint, lingering echo of its power.

The shower water continued to cascade over me, the cold, unrelenting stream washing away the remnants of the nightmare. I was still broken, still hurting, but I was not swallowed whole. I had to face the consequences, face Tyler, face myself.

The echoes of the monster's roar were still present, a haunting reminder of the depths of my despair, a reminder of the fragile line I had walked. But I knew, with a certainty that surprised me, that I had to keep going. The path ahead was arduous, but I had to find a way not to escape the consequences, but to face them.

And as I stepped out of the shower, the weight of my actions still heavy on my shoulders, a faint glimmer of hope emerged. I wasn't swallowed whole, not yet. Just maybe, there was a way out of the darkness, a way to find a path to redemption. But for now, I was simply grateful to still be here, to still have a chance.

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The worn denim of my boot-cut jeans felt familiar against my skin as I pulled on my FFA shirt, the faded emblem a testament to years of dedication. The leather of my boots, scuffed and seasoned, grounded me.

My gaze drifted toward the school entrance, searching for any sign of Tyler. I knew I shouldn't expect anything. We both needed space, a chance to breathe, to process. I'd been too quick to rush into things, and it had all come crashing down, leaving us both feeling shattered.

I wasn't sure what I hoped to see. A wave? A smile? Just a flicker of recognition, a hint of that old connection that had been so strong, so real. But I knew it was a foolish hope.

The second bell, a harsh clang, jolted me out of a trance. My heart hammered against my ribs, a frantic drumbeat echoing the urgency of the situation. I scrambled out of my truck; the door slamming shut behind me with a sound that seemed to reverberate through the trees of the courtyard. I was late.

Mrs. Barnes' classroom door stood ajar, a sliver of light beckoning me inside. I hoped, with a desperate prayer in my heart, that she hadn't noticed my absence. I tiptoed past the threshold, trying to blend into the hum of the classroom, but the loud squeak of the door jamb betrayed my presence.

Mrs. Barnes, perched on the edge of her desk, her eyes sharp and knowing, caught me like a spider ensnaring a fly. A silent, almost resigned wave of her hand showed my seat. I shut the door behind me, the sound of its click a finality that stung.

My gaze fell instinctively upon Tyler’s empty desk, its usual occupant absent. The stark emptiness of the chair, the absence of his familiar energy, pressed down on me like a physical weight. I felt a hollowness bloom in my chest, an ache that resonated with the unspoken words we never said.

Mrs. Barnes noticed my stare, her eyes holding mine for a moment, a silent understanding passing between us. I looked down, a choked apology rising in my throat. I couldn't explain it, this sudden wave of sorrow that threatened to consume me. It felt like a betrayal, a silent admission of my failure.

I turned away; the world blurring around me as I hurried back out the door. I slipped behind the wheel of my truck, the engine roaring to life like a trapped beast. I didn’t know where I was going, not really. Just away, far away from the emptiness that threatened to swallow me whole.

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The asphalt ribbon of the county road ended abruptly, a dead end that mirrored the dead end I felt inside. The air tasted salty, a reminder of the immense storm brewing hundreds of miles out in the Gulf. I turned right; the tires crunching on gravel, and drove down to the beach. The waves roared, a thunderous, rhythmic pulse that matched the chaotic drumbeat in my chest. I parked, the engine sputtering to a halt, and sat staring out at the water.

The vast expanse of the ocean mirrored the emptiness I felt. It was a familiar feeling, one I wore like a second skin, the weight of it pushing down on me. I could see the tears forming, a blurry film obscuring the horizon, but I refused to let them fall. My phone buzzed, vibrating against the leather seat. My parents. They knew. The school had called, no doubt, reporting my transgression, my cowardly flight from reality. I didn't care. I let the phone vibrate.

I glanced at the clock on the dashboard. "4th period," I thought bitterly. If I were back in school, I'd be a zombie, numbly absorbing the information my teachers were trying to force into my head. I’d be an empty vessel, a puppet with strings attached, playing the role they expected me to.

Another phone call. Stacy. I ignored it. Then a barrage of calls, one after another, from her, the school, and a number I didn't recognize. My gut churned. I pulled the phone from my pocket, four missed calls from Stacy, one from the school, and one from a number I didn’t recognize. As I typed a message to Stacy, explaining my whereabouts, my cowardly escape, another call came in. Something inside me, a feeling I couldn’t articulate, told me to answer it. I pressed the green button.

"Hello?"

Silence.

“Hello?” I repeated, my voice laced with a hint of irritation, not directed at the caller, but at the knot of anxiety that had taken root in my stomach.

“Heellooo?” I pressed again, annoyance rising with each syllable.

Then, abruptly, the call ended.

I sent the message to Stacy, then tossed the phone into the passenger seat. I stepped out of the truck, the sand cool and damp beneath my feet. The air was heavy with the smell of salt and rain, a premonition of the storm that was brewing, a storm both inside me and outside. I closed my eyes, breathing deeply, trying to find some semblance of peace in the chaos. But the world around me felt distorted, as if I were standing on the edge of a precipice, staring into an abyss.

And then something shifted. The surrounding air crackled, a subtle but undeniable change. The sand beneath my feet seemed to ripple, as if the earth itself was breathing. I opened my eyes, my breath catching in my throat. The beach, the ocean, the sky—everything was swirling, as if caught in a whirlwind. The storm that was brewing within me, the storm that had been brewing since the coffee shop, was manifesting itself in the physical world. It was more than just a metaphorical storm;, it was something real, something tangible, something terrifying. I stood frozen, unable to move, as the world around me transformed into a kaleidoscope of colors and light.

The storm was here, and it was only just beginning.

The water crept up the shore, inching closer with each passing moment. I watched it, leaning against my truck's bumper, the cold metal a stark contrast to the rising heat in my chest. Time blurred, the minutes melting into each other as I stood there, a prisoner of my guilt. Lightning flashed, a jagged scar across the darkening sky, followed by a thunderclap that rattled my bones.

Rain fell, gentle at first, then grew heavier. I barely registered the change. The pain, the searing, agonizing pain, was already etched deep within me. It couldn't have been worse than the pain I inflicted on Tyler, the gut-wrenching regret that gnawed at my soul.

The storm intensified, the rain turning to a torrent. Hail pelted my back, each icy shard a fresh stab of self-loathing. It was a fitting punishment, I thought, a cruel echo of the damage I had wrought. I deserved this, deserved the sting of every icy shard, the relentless assault of nature mirroring the tempest inside me.

A shadow fell over me, and I looked up to see Stacy, a worried frown creasing her brow as she held an umbrella over us. "Are you trying to get yourself killed?" she yelled, her voice barely audible over the raging storm. "It's a damn severe storm, and you're out here like an idiot!"

She grabbed my arm, pulling me towards the truck. I yanked away; my voice choked with despair. "I deserve this, Stacy. You know I do. I hurt Tyler! I can't forgive myself. He won't ever forgive me, I feel it. I ruined everything."

Stacy's face softened, a flicker of pain in her eyes. "Marty, please, just get in the truck. Let's go home. I'm begging you. You're my best friend. It's getting dangerous out here, and the roads on this beach flood fast. Please, let's go home."

A blinding flash of lightning ripped through the sky, followed by a thunderclap that shook the very ground beneath my feet. It seemed like the world was trying to tell me something, to knock some sense into me. I looked at Stacy; her face a mask of worry. "He will come around," she said, her voice a balm to my raw nerves. "I promise."

I nodded; my throat too tight for words. "Get in your car," I said, gesturing towards her vehicle. "Follow me as close as you can. If the roads flood, my truck will displace the water for you."

Stacy’s eyes darted between me and the ominous sky, her body trembling with fear and the chill of the storm. "Okay," she mumbled, her voice barely a whisper.

I watched as she climbed into her car; her fear echoing the turmoil within me. Then I turned and opened my truck door. As I was about to step inside, a blinding flash of light engulfed me. The world went black.

CHAPTER EIGHT

*The honking of my truck echoed down the endless brick driveway, a jarring sound in the otherwise serene morning air. I parked close to Sarah’s house, wanting to spare her the walk. The front door stood open, a silent invitation. But there was no Sarah waiting for me. A chilling emptiness hung in the air, a palpable absence. My voice, echoing through the house, sounded hollow, lost in the silence. Sarah wasn’t here. Why had she called me if she would not be here? Why was the door open?*

*My feet carried me toward Sarah’s room. The silence grew denser, a suffocating presence. Sarah’s door was ajar, as if beckoning me inside. She sat on the edge of her bed, a picture of dejection. My heart leaped at the sight of her, but my joy was short-lived. Sarah rose and walked away, leaving me standing there, a confused observer to her silent sorrow.*

*I followed her into the living room. She slumped onto the couch, her shoulders shaking with what seemed like uncontrollable sobs. The image of Sarah, the woman who had been in my world, reduced to this state of grief, tore at me. I kneeled in front of her, reaching out with my hand. Her head remained bowed; her sobs unrelenting. She finally looked up at me, her eyes swollen and red, her face a mask of pain.*

*"Who is Tyler?" Her voice, a rasp, shattered the silence.*

*My mind blanked. Tyler? Who was Tyler? I didn’t know anyone named Tyler. "I don't know a Tyler," I stammered, the words tasting like ashes in my mouth.*

*"Don't lie to me!" Her voice rose, an accusation ringing in every syllable. "I saw you with Tyler yesterday, holding hands.”*

*My confusion grew. I was genuinely bewildered. I didn't know anyone named Tyler. I was telling the truth. "Sarah, I'm not lying. I don't know anyone named Tyler. I swear."*

*I stood up, the weight of her accusation pressing down on me. I ran my hands through my hair, desperate to understand. My mind raced, trying to make sense of her accusations. Was this a cruel joke? A test of my loyalty? I couldn't comprehend what was happening.*

*Sarah stood up, walking toward me. Her hand moved towards my chest, hovering inches from my heart. "Yes, you know Tyler," she whispered.*

*Her words hung in the air, chilling me to the core. Before she could touch me, I felt it. A searing pain, like a sledgehammer slamming into my chest. The air rushed out of my lungs, replaced by a gasp of shock and disbelief.*

*I stumbled backward; my eyes wide with fear. I looked down at my chest, the spot where she had tried to touch me, and my heart skipped a beat. My palm and fingers, the ones I had just placed on my chest, burned, blackened, as if scorched by fire.*

*My gaze shot back to Sarah. She stood inches away from me; her face a mixture of pain and sorrow. “I’ll forgive you if you just tell me the truth, Marty. It will hurt, yes, but I’ll forgive you in time. Go be with him.”*

*I stared at her, my mind spinning, my heart pounding like a drum. What was going on? Who was Tyler? What did Sarah know I didn't?*

*She raised her hand again, her voice a shaky whisper. "Go. Be happy with Tyler. I promise I’ll be fine.”*

*The second blow came, the same searing pain as before. I saw her face, her form, blur, her features melting into an indistinct mass. The surrounding room became an ocean of black, swallowing everything in its path.*

*There was no light, no sound, just space. It was as if suspended in the universe, a lone speck adrift in the vastness. I tried to scream, to call out for Sarah, but sound lost in the emptiness. My lips moved, but no sound escaped.*

*Then, a voice, faint but distinct, pierced the silence. "Come on, kid!"*

*Slowly, the surrounding blackness dissipated. The same voice spoke again, "Be strong, you can..." The voice faded away, but the light that filled the emptiness was growing stronger, brighter, taking shape.*

*A street, a familiar street. Mailboxes, driveways, yards; it felt like home, yet I couldn't remember how. I was walking, pulled by an invisible force, towards a house I knew, yet couldn’t recall. As I reached the porch, a voice spoke from behind me. "We got him back."*

*I turned, but saw no one. A blinding light appeared behind me, a different voice now, but still coming from the street. "How long was he gone?”*

*The light felt warm, radiating peace and comfort, a soothing beacon in the confusion. “Approximately thirty minutes,” the first voice replied.*

*I turned back towards the house. As I looked up, I saw someone standing in the doorway. My heart skipped a beat. "Tyler? Why are you here? What's happening?”*

*He reached out, his hand gently grasping mine. “Come on,” he said, his voice soft and reassuring. He led me inside the house, his grip firm but comforting. He led me to a room that felt familiar, my room. “Rest now,” he said, pulling the blanket over me.*

*A tear rolled down his cheek. He ran his hand across my forehead, my cheek, my ear. Then he leaned down and kissed my forehead. “Rest now,” he whispered, shutting the door behind him.*

*I drifted into sleep, the world around me fading into darkness.*

I woke up, startled. Medical equipment surrounded me, the beeping of machines a harsh reminder of my situation. A tube protruded from my throat, obstructing my breathing. I tried to pull it out, but a nurse in blue scrubs rushed to my side, holding my hands down.

“I need the doctor in here!” She looked at me, her expression calm, but her voice urgent. “You had to be intubated, Marty. You weren’t breathing on your own. You won’t be able to speak until we pull the tube out.”

I struggled against the restraints, my body reacting with fear and confusion. A doctor in a white coat hurried over, her face concerned. "Marty, please be still. You’ll hurt yourself,” she said, then addressed the nurse. “We need to sedate him. Push three milligrams of midazolam now."

I heard the nurse’s voice as the darkness enveloped me again. “I can’t believe he woke up! Someone is looking out for this kid…”

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The world slowly coalesced around me, a hazy blur at first, then solidifying into the familiar contours of my hospital room. My mom’s voice, a soothing balm, wrapped around me, her hand a comforting weight on my forearm. The room smelled of antiseptic and something sweet, a strange concoction of hospital sterility and the faintest hint of lavender. I drifted back into the comforting darkness, the touch of my mom’s hand anchoring me.

I was jolted awake again by a different voice, a voice I recognized as Stacy’s, laced with worry. “How is he?” The answer, my dad’s voice, laden with relief, “His doctor said he should be awake any time now. He might be cloudy, though, but he will make it.” My eyes fluttered open, the world coming into focus, and I let out a scratchy groan. “You’ve looked better, Stac.”

My dad was at my bedside in an instant, his relief palpable. “Hey son, how are you feeling kiddo?” he said, tears welling in his eyes. Stacy joined him, her smile a beacon of hope in the sterile white of the room. I tried to speak, but my voice felt thick and foreign, like a forgotten language.

“Sarah needs to stop eating spinach because she has a killer Bruce Lee one inch punch.” I uttered, my words slurred and confused. My dad and Stacy exchanged bewildered glances. I was aware of their confusion but felt a wave of amusement at the nonsensical nature of my words, a consequence, I later realized, of my recent ordeal.

A woman in a white coat appeared in the doorway, her voice calm and measured. “He was dreaming when the paramedics were using the defibrillator. It happens often.” Dr. Hanzelka, as she introduced herself, moved closer to my bed, her presence reassuring. She shone a light in my eyes, a routine procedure that felt strangely invasive.

“Do you know what year it is, Marty?” she asked, her voice gentle but firm. “2024,” I croaked, my throat still dry and scratchy. “It’s 2024.”

“Good, do you remember what town you are in?” she pressed on.

I met her gaze, a familiar warmth spreading through me. “Yea, we are in Honolulu, and we are all drinking mojitos,” I held my hand up like holding a cup. My dad chuckled, his smile mirroring my own. “Just kidding, we are in Midway.”

Stacy looked away, her face etched with a mixture of relief and sadness. It felt like there was more to this story, a layer of unspoken truth that hung heavy in the air.

“Now, Marty, I am going to tell you something that will be a little startling, okay?” Dr. Hanzelka's smile faded, her voice taking on a somber tone. “But first, do you remember anything that happened before you woke up here?”

My eyes met Stacy’s, her face pale, her lips trembling. I saw fear and grief mirrored in her eyes, a reflection of my uncertainty. “I remember going to my high school, running on the track before the gym opened, taking a quick shower, and then going to class.” My words carried a semblance of confidence, but a knot of anxiety tightened in my stomach.

Stacy turned away, a sob escaping her lips. Then she turned back to me, her eyes glistening with tears. “Unfortunately, Marty, I am sure the first part with the track is correct, but you never went to class. From what I gathered from your friend Stacy here, and what your parents gathered from your teacher, Mrs. Barnes, was it?” Dr. Hanzelka looked at my dad, who nodded in confirmation. “You ended up driving to the beach that day.”

A chill ran down my spine, a sense of dread settling upon me. My ears perked up, the phrase “that day” resonating in my mind. “Your friend Stacy here found you at the beach.”

The room seemed to shrink, the air thickening with unspoken tension. As if a dam had burst within my mind, fragmented memories flooded back, chaotic and disorienting. I closed my eyes; the images playing out like a fragmented film reel. The beach, the storm, the crash of waves, and then…nothing.

Dr. Hanzelka’s voice was a quiet tremor in the room, “You were hit by lightning, Marty.”

My eyes flew open wide with disbelief. The word "lightning" echoed in my mind, a visceral reminder of the life-altering event that had taken place. “And if your friend here hadn’t gone after you,” Dr. Hanzelka continued, her voice laced with a hint of warning, “let’s just say you wouldn’t be here right now.”

I looked at Stacy, the full weight of her actions finally hitting me. She had saved my life. Her quick thinking and bravery had pulled me back from the brink. Tears welled up in my eyes, a torrent of gratitude and relief washing over me.

Dr. Hanzelka rose from her seat, a warmth returning to her eyes. “You’re safe now, and out of the woods. I expect you might have some amnesia, but I expect a full recovery. I will see when we can get you released, but it won’t be immediately, early next week. Get some rest, and I’ll be back to check on you.”

She exited the room, leaving me alone with my thoughts. The weight of what had happened, the fragility of life, and the profound impact of those who loved me settled upon me. Given a second chance, a gift I would not take for granted. The beach, the lightning, the memory of that day would forever etch in my mind, a reminder of the grace and resilience that had brought me back to life. The world felt different now, imbued with a deeper appreciation for the simple things, the warmth of my family, the love of my friends, and the preciousness of life itself. I closed my eyes, a smile playing on my lips, and drifted back into a peaceful sleep, the shadows of my past replaced by the promise of a future filled with possibility.

CHAPTER NINE

Over the next few days, the words "that day" that spilled out of Dr. Hanzelka's mouth dug into every corner of my brain. My mom was in one chair my hospital brought in, with an extra one for Dad. Usually, there was one open unless my parents were here, and Stacy came by. But right now, it was just Mom. She brought in her knitting basket, keeping me company since Dad had an errand to run. Mom was trying to keep his secret, but she accidentally let some information slip. All I could piece together was that someone was coming over to visit me.

Before I could let anything or anyone pull my undivided attention, I sat up on the bed, wrapped my legs over the side, and let them touch the floor. My mom gasped and rushed over to me, saying that my legs were too weak. I needed to stay in bed. I couldn’t, though. I was getting bored just lying there. “I got this, Mom. If I can survive a lightning bolt, then I can survive a walk to the window seal.” She moaned, then chuckled, “Okay.” She guarded my waist with her hands, stepping behind me each of those ten steps to the window from my bed. I placed my hands on the window seal and looked out before bowing my head.

"Mom," I sighed, "How long was I sleeping before I woke up?" Mom's eyes swelled, and before she could answer, “Be truthful, mom, I can handle it.” A tear ran down her rose-flush cheeks, and her bottom lip was trembling. “Oh honey, that doesn't matter now. You're back with us now, that's all that matters.” "No mom, how long!" I got upset, and the beeping on the heart machine was getting faster. Mom turned away to wipe her eyes. "Two weeks and two days." My eyes widened and stared out the window, but not registering anything so my mind could wrap around the answer she just gave.

"Two weeks!" It was a statement, not a question. I took a big, long breath. "Dr. H said they used the defibrillator on me. How long was I dead?" The words seemed unreal to hear coming from my mouth. Mom had several tears now rolling down her cheeks. "You didn't have a pulse for over an hour, Marty. Stacy started performing CPR as soon as she saw you hit the sand. She didn't stop until the paramedics came and took over. When they got there, it had already been thirty minutes. She couldn't stop, and I was thankful for her being there. The paramedics shocked you two times with no signs of a pulse in the first initial shock, but on the last two times they said they got responses that your heart was trying to beat. When they pulled up to the emergency room and unloaded you, suddenly your pulse became strong."

I turned toward my mom and hugged her. When we pulled away, I had tears in my vision, and my mom blew her nose. "Stacy told me what you were doing out there, honey, and I just want you to know that I love you with all my heart, and I want you to be happy with whom you want." Those sweet words filled my insides, and I felt alive. I gave my mom another hug and said thank you. I turned back to the window and saw colors of enlightenment outside. I felt calmer.

As I am staring out the window, I hear the door open and figured it was my dad. Then suddenly I hear, "Hot damn, look at that ass! I bet Tyl---," Stacy assumingly spots Mom sitting down in her chair, "I mean nice ass Marty." Stacy chuckles as I flew around closing the back of my hospital gown. "They should really design these to cover everything, but hey," I'm now twisting my waist with my arms stretched out, "it feels good to go commando down there." Mom blushes, and Stacy contorts her face into disgust and throws a Get Well stuffed bear at me. Stacy goes to my mom and kneels low enough to whisper something into her ear. Once she finishes up, Mom gets up and says she's going down to the cafeteria.

I eye Stacy as she's walking me back to my bed, but before I sit down on the edge I grab her by the shoulders, "Thank you for saving my life Stacy." I hug her, and she brushes it off like it’s something she does every day. I'm laying down on the bed now, but sitting up when Stacy tells me she has a little "Welcome back to the land of the living" surprise for me. She jumps up from the spot on the bed she was sitting at, and beams of glory. "Now this present is extremely fragile, and you have to hold it gently, okay?" I just look at her with confusion. She walks to the door, but before she opens it, she turns around and says that she means it. It's fragile. I still looked at her in confusion. She opens the door slowly to build anticipation. "Damn it Stac, just give it to me already!" I'm tired of waiting. She faces me, "Party Pooper," and walks outside into the hall with the door wide open. Then I look down to flatten my sheets on my lap so whatever she got me doesn't accidentally fall. I look up and see shorts coming in. I follow the shorts to a red shirt that says, "Get Well Soon Marty" and the guy wearing it. Tyler, standing in my hospital room door. Looking super cute with his blonde hair combed to the side, green eyes gleaming with joy, is staring at me with a smile that can end wars across the globe. He steps up to my bed, my mouth open with surprise and joy. I think my heart stopped and started again. His shy voice, "Hey You," sounded like music in my ears and nestled comfortably in my heart. Just those two words started a warming fire deep inside me, like it touched my soul. I lost the entire vocabulary I have learned in my life, except two words that flew out of me "love you too!" I shook my head trying to pretend it was coma talk, and muffled "I mean Hey to you too." Tyler blushes, and I pat my side of the bed.

"I'm sorry Ty for hur—" Tyler cut me off and says that he came after visiting hours the first night I been admitted, but my mom was in here, so he just left and tried again the second night, but my mom was still staying here. She stopped Tyler before he could run away again, and we talked for a long time about what had happened at the coffee shop when Tyler opened his past. Then they agreed I could stay at night if Tyler's brother, Nick, agreed so he can sleep with me here on the hospital bed while my parents went home to sleep. I couldn't believe that Tyler was staying with me at night. That's what my mom meant by "wanting me to be happy with whom I want."

He placed a hand on my chest and asked if it hurts, but I say no. He leans into me and tries to kiss me, but before he can, I stop him. “Ty, I want to kiss you so bad. I never thought I could have feelings with a guy, but the moment I saw you walking, I pulled with such a force that I completely forgot about… Sarah…” Tyler looks at me with sad eyes, and moves to get up, but I grab him arm gently, "I just need to tell her in person who it's over, Ty, because I want to be with you, if of course, you want to be with me." His eyes have hearts floating around in them, and he says, "I forgot you were a gentleman, but yes, I want to be with you, but I will wait forever if I have to. I don't want to push you into breaking up with her if you still love her." I gleamed up at Tyler. "Once I get out of here, I will plan a trip to Grand Valley, because I don't want you to wait forever. I have a question for you Ty, how did you get the nurses to agree to let you stay here all night? The nurse seemed like a hard ass with the rules here."

Tyler laughs, "You mean Nurse Jackie?" I heard a snicker in the hallway and a quiet "Ow," and Tyler looks at the door and says, "Funny guys, you can come in." Two nurses come in, and one of them is Nurse Jackie. "One, I am not a hard ass kid, and two, we all love Tyler on this floor." I looked at Tyler, and he smiled. "These two, once you get to know them, are hilarious. I promise, they helped me here when—" Nurse Jackie chimes in, "Ass Face attacked him." The other nurse slaps her, while Nurse Jackie covers her mouth, surprised she just said ass face out loud. Nurse Jackie narrows her eyes at me, and she moves closer to me and bends down and whispers in close range, "Hurt him, and—" I finish the sentence for her, "Or I'll disappear?" She looks at me dumbfounded, and I chuckle, "Nick already beat you to that speech, but I promise I will be the best gentleman to this gentleman forever." I tilt my head down like I'm holding the rim of my Stetson. Tyler looks at me with hopeful eyes. I have never seen him act like himself before, and it's amazing to see those sweet, amazing dimples on his face as he laughs and smiles with the nurses.

Over the next few days, the words "that day" that spilled out of Dr. Hanzelka's mouth burrowed themselves into every corner of my brain. My mom was a constant fixture in my hospital room, her knitting needles clicking a soothing rhythm against the sterile white walls. The extra chair my dad brought in for her was a welcome sight. It was a silent promise that, despite the chaos, life would return to a semblance of normalcy. But those words, "that day," haunted me.

Mom tried to keep my dad's secret, but a slip of the tongue revealed someone was coming to see me. My curiosity piqued, I sat up in bed, my legs tingling with newfound strength. Mom gasped, her eyes widening as she rushed over to me, her hands hovering protectively near my waist. "Marty, your legs are still too weak! Stay in bed!"

But I was restless, the boredom gnawing at me. "I got this, Mom," I insisted. "If I can survive a lightning bolt, I can survive a walk to the window." Mom sighed, a mixture of worry and resignation in her voice. "Okay," she conceded, her hands guarding my waist as I took those ten steps to the window, her gentle touch anchoring me.

I reached the window, pressing my hands against the cool glass, and stared out at the world. The colors were vibrant, the sky a canvas of blues and whites. A feeling of peace settled over me, but beneath the surface, an unsettling question swirled. "Mom," I asked, my voice hushed, "how long was I asleep?"

Mom's eyes welled up, the tears threatening to spill. I knew this was a sensitive topic, so I pressed on, "Be truthful, Mom. I can handle it."

She took a deep breath, her voice shaky. "Oh, honey, that doesn't matter now. You're back with us. That's all that matters."

"No, Mom, how long?" I insisted, my voice edged with urgency. The beeping of the heart monitor quickened, mimicking the frantic rhythm of my heart.

Mom turned away, wiping her eyes. "Two weeks and two days," she whispered, her voice barely audible.

My eyes widened, taking in the answer’s magnitude. "Two weeks!" I said, more a statement than a question. The air thickened around me, the reality of the situation sinking in with a thud.

I inhaled deeply; the breath hitching in my chest. "Dr. H said they used the defibrillator on me. How long was I… dead?" The words felt foreign in my mouth, the gravity of them pressing down on me.

Mom's tears flowed freely now. “You didn't have a pulse for over an hour, Marty. Stacy started performing CPR as soon as she saw you hit the sand. She didn't stop until the paramedics came and took over. By the time they got there, it had already been thirty minutes. She wouldn't stop, and I am so thankful for her being there. The paramedics shocked you three times, but there was no sign of a pulse at first. But on the last shock, they said they got responses, like your heart was trying to fight back. When they got to the emergency room, they unloaded you, and suddenly your pulse became strong.”

I turned to my mom, pulling her into a hug. Her warmth enveloped me, her gentle touch a reminder of the life I had been so close to losing. We pulled away, tears blurring my vision. Mom blew her nose, a muffled sound that broke the silence.

"Stacy told me what you were doing out there, honey," she said, her voice soft. “And I just want you to know that I love you with all my heart, and I want you to be happy with whom you want.”

Those words filled my insides with a warmth that spread through my body, making me feel truly alive. I gave my mom another hug, whispering a heartfelt “Thank you.” Turning back to the window, I saw the world anew, the colors brighter, the air cleaner. I felt calmer, a sense of peace settling over me.

As I stared out the window, the door opened, and I assumed it was my dad. But then I heard a voice, its tone a mix of surprise and amusement. "Hot damn, look at that ass! I bet Ty-…" The voice faltered as Stacy realized my mom was sitting in the chair. "I mean nice ass, Marty," she said with a chuckle, her voice laced with teasing.

I spun around, grabbing the back of my hospital gown, feeling the warmth flush through my cheeks. "They should really design these to cover everything," I muttered, my arms stretched out awkwardly as I twisted my waist. "But hey, it feels good to go commando down there."

Mom blushed, her cheeks the color of a rose. Stacy, with a mixture of disgust and amusement on her face, threw a Get Well stuffed bear at me. She then turned to my mom, kneeling to whisper something in her ear. Mom rose from her chair and announced she was going down to the cafeteria.

I eyed Stacy as she walked me back to my bed. Before I could sit down, I grabbed her by the shoulders. "Thank you for saving my life, Stacy," I said, my voice thick with emotion.

I pulled her into a hug, and she brushed it off as if it were nothing. "Don't mention it," she said, her voice light. "Just doing my job. Thou I wouldn't mind a Best Friend of the Year award." I laughed, and I settled back onto the bed, my heart still racing from the surge of gratitude I felt.

Stacy then announced she had a "Welcome back to the land of the living" surprise for me. She jumped off the bed, a mischievous gleam in her eyes. "Now this present is extremely fragile," she warned. “Hold it gently, okay?"

I looked at her with confusion. "What is it?" I asked, my curiosity piqued.

She walked toward the door, turning back to me with a dramatic flourish. "It's very fragile," she repeated, her voice a hushed whisper.

"Damn it, Stac, just give it to me already!" I exclaimed, growing impatient.

She opened the door slowly, creating a sense of anticipation. "Party Pooper," she said with a playful scolding. Then she stepped outside into the hallway, leaving the door wide open.

I looked down at my sheets, smoothing them out, trying to be ready for whatever surprise she had in store. Then I looked up, my jaw dropping in astonishment. Walking towards me, a red shirt emblazoned with "Get Well Soon, Marty" on it, was Tyler. He looked unbelievably cute with his blonde hair neatly combed to the side, his green eyes gleaming with joy as he stared at me. A smile, radiant and warm, stretched across his face. He stopped at the edge of my bed, his presence filling the room with a potent mix of happiness and hope.

My mouth opened in surprise, and I think my heart stopped and started again. His voice, shy and sweet, was like music to my ears. "Hey, You," he said, the two words settling comfortably in my heart. It was like a spark, igniting a warm fire deep inside me, touching my very soul.

My entire vocabulary seemed to disappear, leaving me speechless except for three words that burst forth. "Love you too!" I blurted out, my cheeks burning.

I shook my head, trying to dismiss it as coma-induced gibberish. "I mean… Hey to you too," I mumbled, my voice barely above a whisper.

Tyler blushed, a soft pink blooming on his cheeks. He gently patted the spot beside him on the bed. "Come on, sit up," he said, his voice laced with concern.

"I'm sorry, Ty," I said, my voice choked with emotion. “For hurting…” I trailed off, unable to finish the sentence. I never thought I could have feelings for a guy, but the moment I saw Tyler walking to school on the first day, I became drawn to him with an irresistible force. It was a force that completely eclipsed everything else, even… Sarah.

Tyler's eyes met mine, and he was leaning closer to my face, to my lips. I could smell his toothpaste and his cologne. Before he could land a kiss on my lips. I had to turn my face away. The once hope filled eyes, turned sad. He got up, but I reached out and gently grabbed his arm. "Ty, I want to kiss you so bad," I confessed. "I wanted to kiss you so bad at the coffee shop before I ruined everything that night when I hurt you..." I glanced down and ran my fingers where I grabbed him hard and made him scared of me. "I just need to tell her in person who it's over, Sarah, my girlfriend, I mean, because I want to be with you. If you want to be with me, that is."

His eyes softened, a glimmer of hope flickering back in them. "I forgot you were a gentleman," he said, a smile playing on his lips. "But yes, I want to be with you. I will wait forever if I must. I don't want to push you into breaking up with her if you still love her."

I gazed up at him, my heart filled with a new sense of hope. "Once I get out of here, I will plan a trip to Grand Valley," I said, my voice filled with determination. "Because I don't want you to. Wait, no, you don't deserve to wait forever for someone to treat you right." Tyler's face became even more filled with pink as his ears turned red and he tried to hide them.

I smiled and ran my fingers under his chin to have him meet my gaze. "I have a question, Ty. How did you get the nurses to agree to letting you stay here all night? One of them seemed like a hard ass with the rules here."

Tyler chuckled, a warm, infectious sound. "I'm assuming you mean Nurse Jackie?" he asked, his eyes twinkling with amusement.

Just then, we heard a snicker in the hallway, followed by a muffled "Ow.” Tyler looked towards the door, his smile widening. "Funny guys, you can come in."

Two nurses entered the room, one of them Nurse Jackie. She was a tall, imposing woman with a stern expression, but her eyes held a surprising warmth. "One, I am not a hard ass kid," she said with a playful wink. "And two, we all love Tyler on this floor."

I looked at Tyler, who just smiled. "These two," he said, gesturing to the nurses, "once you get to know them, they're hilarious. They helped me here when…"

Nurse Jackie cut him off. "Ass Face attacked him," she said, her voice laced with humor.

The other nurse slapped her arm, her face flushed with embarrassment. "Jackie!" she exclaimed; her eyes wide.

Jackie covered her mouth, a look of surprise flashing across her face. "I didn't mean to say that out loud," she mumbled.

Then Nurse Jackie narrowed her eyes at me, her gaze intense. She moved closer to me, bending down and whispering in my ear. "Hurt him, and…"

I finished the sentence for her. "Or I'll disappear?"

She stared at me in disbelief, a mixture of amusement and admiration in her eyes. I chuckled. "Nick already beat you to that speech, but I promise I will be the best gentleman to this gentleman forever." I tilted my head down, pretending to hold the rim of a Stetson. My voice was laced with a playful sincerity.

Tyler looked at me, his eyes filled with hope. I had never seen him act so freely, so at ease. His sweet dimples, normally hidden behind a mask of shyness, were now on full display as he laughed along with the nurses.

The world, once a blurry canvas of pain and uncertainty, was coming into focus. And at the center of that focus, brighter than any sun, was Tyler. A feeling of hope, stronger than anything I had ever felt, blossomed in my chest, spreading through my body like a warm current. And in that moment, I knew that despite the storm I had weathered, life, in its infinite wisdom, had brought me something truly extraordinary. And I was ready to embrace it with all my heart.

CHAPTER TEN

Three weeks and four days. That's how long I spent in the hospital, a captive of my recklessness. Dr. H, as I affectionately called her, finally deemed me fit for home. "Just one condition, Marty," she said with a twinkle in her eye. "No more standing in storms on the beach. Promise me."

And I did, with a cowboy's honor. I wouldn't break a promise, not even to the tempestuous ocean.

Nurse Jackie, she'd grown soft on me. It was my country charm, or it was Tyler who kept her busy with his presence every day after school. Tyler, my boy, couldn't hold me, couldn't kiss me the way I wanted, not with Sarah still hanging on. Sarah, my sweetheart from back home, called every day, her voice a bittersweet symphony. She couldn't get away. Her parents kept her busy, preparing her for her future. Sarah, brilliant, a shining star on the horizon. She took Advanced Placement courses, even her general education at the local community college, a summer warrior. I was proud of her, truly.

But every call was a video call. Every time, I knew my face betrayed me. The guilt, the longing. It all mirrored in my eyes, a reflection of my conflicted heart. Tyler, always there, became my silent ally. He'd show me funny videos, we'd do homework side-by-side. My parents, ever vigilant, entrusted Tyler with fetching my assignments. "Can't fall behind, Marty," they'd say. "You're a senior now."

Tyler, oh Tyler, he was everything I wanted. Cute, funny, and smart. He'd jump off the bed, disappear when Sarah's face popped on the screen. The first few times, he'd try to hide his emotions, excusing himself, making a dash for the cafeteria or the nurses' station.

The fourth day, he stepped out, and I saw his face contort with pain. He heard us exchange "I love you." It felt strange even to me. Sarah hadn't said it the first three times she called, but now it slipped out like a confession. I ended the call just as I saw Tyler's eyes widen. "I'm sorry, I have to go," he said, his voice strained. He bumped into the door, the sound echoing as it slammed shut with him in the room. "Ty, babe, what's wrong?" I cried, shooting up from the bed.

He looked at me, tears welling up, his lip trembling. "I have to go, bye..." he choked out, before rushing out. I jumped from the bed, following him, "Ty!"

He was gone, but I heard the stairwell door close. His sobs muffled but distinct, "I'm so stupid! I knew it!" as he ran down the stairs.

By the time I reached him, he'd slumped down, his back against the wall, near the final door. "I need to stop eating this hospital food," I said, catching my breath, "Or you're really fast."

His eyes, red and swollen, looked up at me. "Don't do that to me, Marty. I know you still love her. I heard it from you. I'm so stupid thinking you, of all people, would go gay for me."

My heart ached. Where was this coming from? “Ty, I want to be with you. That was the first time she said it. You've been with me for every call. That was the first time she said it since she started called me since I been here at the hospital.”

Tyler wiped his eyes, "I'm so--"

I stopped him with a kiss, passionate, urgent. My hand found its way to the back of his neck. I pulled away, and he stared back at me, stunned. His lips twitched, a smile creeping onto his face. "Um, I guess this makes us official?" I asked, my voice husky.

"I'm sorr----"

This time, Tyler silenced me with his own kiss, a long, soul-stirring embrace. We pulled away, gasping for air, lost in each other's gaze.

Someone cleared their throat, a loud "AHEM" from above. We looked up, smirking, to find Nurse Jackie. She stood at the top of the stairs, her face a mixture of concern and amusement. "We almost called security to search the whole building for you, Marty," she said, "But someone spotted you bolting through the door."

I winked at Tyler and nodded towards Nurse Jackie. "You care to follow me back to my room, Ty?"

Tyler grinned, giving me a quick peck on the lips. "I sure would...Babe."

I laughed, and Nurse Jackie offered me a hand to help me up. We started up the stairs to the elevator. As we climbed, I felt Tyler's hand close around the back of my hospital gown. "Ummmm..." he murmured.

I chuckled. "Aw, I guess Stacy was wrong. You don't like my ass. I'll have to tell her."

His hand slipped away, leaving me exposed. Nurse Jackie sighed. "Ugh, I'm going to need years of therapy after this."

We laughed, and as we reached the elevator, I gripped Tyler's pinky with mine. I glimpsed at him, his dimple peeking out, making my heart soar.

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“Home, sweet home,” Dad announced as we stepped inside, the familiar scent of wood polish and my mom’s cinnamon candles swirling around us. “Your mother and I haven’t changed a thing since you were last here.”

I threw back my head and laughed. “Dad, it's only been three weeks, not thirty years!”

He choked back a fake sob. “I remember it like it was yesterday when you flew the coop.”

“Go do something useful, go start the BBQ pit, would you?” Mom tossed a pillow from the couch at him.

Dad, ever the comedian, caught it with a dramatic flourish. “My word, a woman’s wrath! I’m banished to the backyard for my crimes against decor.”

Mom, ever the queen of hospitality, switched gears. "Tyler dear, are you staying over for dinner?"

Tyler glanced at Stacy, a silent question in his eyes—why wasn't she being included? But before he could speak, Mom answered for him, “She lives right next door, so she has two homes. I sometimes feel she loves it better here. Which reminds me; I need to make you two a spare key.”

Tyler smiled, relief washing over him. “Oh well, then yes, ma’am, I can stay. Let me just call my brother to let him know Marty’s home and I’m staying for dinner.”

He reached for his phone, but Mom was already on the case. “Good idea! And see if he wants to join us, too. I have a feeling we’ll be seeing you a lot more around here, and I would love to meet him.”

I shot Mom a look, a silent plea for her to stop intruding on Tyler's life. She chuckled and came over, placing a hand on both our shoulders. “I love it… You’re much, much cuter than that girl from Grand Valley. You two make a cute couple.”

Stacy, ever the quick-witted one, sprayed her water across the coffee table. Laughter bubbled out of her, echoing through the living room. I shook my head, blushing from embarrassment. “Mom! Stop it.”

I gestured for Tyler to take a seat on the sofa. "Want anything to drink?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

"Pop," he answered, his gaze dropping shyly to the floor.

I smirked, enjoying his simple answer. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Nobody else calls soda pop besides my family," I told him. "it's cute, actually."

Stacy agreed, "Yeah, I found it cute when you asked me if I wanted a pop the first time."

As I made my way to the kitchen, I overheard Stacy’s recounting of her first knock on my door. “His dad said I'm cuter than that, Sarah, and to make sure he wears a condom! The best part... apparently if you break his heart, then I already have his dad's blessing for us getting married.”

Laughter erupted from the living room. I cringed, shaking my head. “I'm going to go change,” I mumbled, handing them their drinks before retreating upstairs. “I'll be back in a sec.”

Then when I reached the top of the stairs, Stacy’s voice drifted down. “I bet he misses his boots.”

I leaned over the railing to look at them. “Damn straight I do!” I shouted, then continued to my room.

"You are going to love this," Stacy said, her voice full of mischief. “Make sure you sit right here, and I promise you won’t regret it.”

The doorbell rang, and I heard Nick’s booming voice greeting everyone. As I was stepping in my room, trying to decipher Stacy’s cryptic message. What was Tyler going to love?

My fingers brushed against my favorite pair of boot-cut jeans, my belt with the two rifles crossed in the center of the buckle, and my blue and white western shirt. I was about to pull on my boots and grab my light gray Stetson hat when my phone rang. Sarah's name flashed on the screen.

“Hey Sarah,” I answered, "What’s wrong? You usually video call me.”

“I met someone…” she choked out, her voice trembling.

My heart skipped a beat. “Sarah, what?” I sat down on my bed.

“I’m so sorry Marty, I'm completely torn between you and this new guy, I was missing you so much, and when you landed in the hospital, I was a mess when Ryan just came out of nowhere and I started liking him.” She sobbed.

A wave of relief washed over me. I had known this day would come. Sarah was a kind, genuine girl, but we were both in separate places now. I met someone too. “Sarah,” I said gently, “you’re not the only one. I met someone too.”

She went silent, you can hear the sadness but relief in her voice. “I hope this new girl makes you happy. What's her name?”

I sighed. “It’s not her, Sarah. It’s him.”

“Oh,” she whispered, "Is he… is he good for you?"

I smiled, thinking of Tyler's infectious smile, his mischievous sparkle, and the way he looked at me with so much intensity. "He is," I admitted. “He's everything I never knew I wanted.”

We talked for a few more minutes, and Sarah asked if we could still be in touch. I said yes, of course. I still cared about her. We wished each other well and hung up.

I grabbed my hat, but hesitated. I didn’t feel like wearing it downstairs, so I held it. Something about the way I felt, the way Tyler made me feel, made me wholesome. I walked downstairs, a strange calm replacing the guilt I felt because I kissed Tyler before breaking up with Sarah. Not all my emotions could be that easy to melt away, because I was still upset that, well, the girl I had dated since our sophomore year just broke up with me over the phone.

The moment I landed on the last step, Tyler must've seen the heartache on my face, he sprang up, a blur of movement. Stacy and Nick followed suit, Nick staring at me with an intensity that sent shivers down my spine.

Stacy and Tyler were both asking what was wrong, but I remained silent. I had a plan. I headed straight for Tyler, looking into his eyes. I tilted his head back and kissed him, dipping him slightly.

The world faded away. We were alone, lost in the moment. When we finally broke apart, Tyler was speechless, lost in the depth of my gaze. “You just kissed me like you haven’t seen me in years,” he whispered, his voice raw with emotion.

Stacy, fanning herself, whispered, “Damn, that was hot.”

My mom and dad, alerted by the commotion, emerged from the kitchen, their expressions a mixture of surprise and amusement. Mom was giving Dad soft slaps on his arm, and Dad was chuckling. “Yeah, Hun, I have eyes. I'm seeing the same thing as you, dear.”

I dropped to one knee in front of Tyler, my hat resting on my chest. Tyler sat down on the edge of the recliner; his eyes wide, unsure of what was unfolding. Everyone was waiting, their breath held.

“Tyler,” I began, my voice trembling with a mix of nerves and exhilaration. “The first day I saw you, it wasn’t in the hallway. I saw you walking down the sidewalk to school. I couldn’t look away and I almost crashed the truck into a parked car. It was like a force was telling me I had to know your name. Then, by some saving grace, you were in the hallway, heading to the same class I couldn’t find. I called you ‘mystery guy’ until I finally learned your name. And even now, you’re a mystery to me. I never felt so much like I do when I see you smiling. I know for sure I didn’t want to stop seeing you smile, because those dimples light up my life. I told you in the hospital, the day you came into my room with your white Converse shoes, light gray socks, knee-length khaki shorts, your red ‘Get Well Soon’ shirt that you charmed people to sign with a black sharpie… I knew then I wanted to be with you more than anything in this world. But you knew I had to do something first before I could kiss you. I had to… well, I don’t regret our time in the stairway, but I had to break up with Sarah before I did anything with you.

Tyler tried to interrupt, but I held up my hand, my eyes fixed on his. “As of twenty minutes ago, I’m a free man.”

A loud gasp rippled through the room. Everyone, except Tyler, understood what I meant. Tyler was still trying to figure it out. He blinked, his gaze shifting from me to Stacy, back to me, as if he were trying to make sense of the whirlwind of emotions swirling around him.

“Tyler Austin Walker,” I continued, my voice firm, “Would you make me the happiest cowboy ever, and my first boyfriend? And I promise…”

I looked at Nick, his expression unreadable. Then back at Tyler’s eyes. “I promise to give you an endless amount of kisses, protect you with all my might, fight for you with all my will, treat you right, like you deserve to be treated. I promise I’ll never hurt you physically or emotionally. I promise to be your rock, the one who keeps you grounded. Will you be my boyfriend?”

Everyone waited. The tension in the room was palpable. Finally, Tyler answered, cupping his hands around my face. “Yes, I would love to be your boyfriend.”

The room erupted in applause and cheers. My mom and dad were beaming, their eyes filled with pride. Stacy was already planning our first double date, while Nick, still lost in thought, couldn’t quite seem to believe what was happening.

There were two more things I needed to get off my chest first before I settle in with Tyler. It had occurred to me that when I kissed Tyler in front of my parents that I hadn't talked to them first about me being gay. I gave Tyler a quick peck on the lips and hugged him when I whispered in his ear, "I need to talk to my parents really quick." Tyler nodded and let go of my waist.

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I walked over to my folks and asked if we could go into the backyard and talk for a bit, and nodded. We sat down in the enclose patio with my parents sitting close together and I'm directly opposite to them.

"I realize we have always been open with each other, but I failed to consider how you both might feel about me being with Ty. I assumed our openness would lead to acceptance of my true self. To be completely honest, I didn't even know this side of me existed until I started at Midway High." My voice trembled and a heavy silence hung between my parents before my dad finally spoke.

"My child, it doesn't matter who you are or what your identity may be. In fact, your openness with Tyler, without even consulting us, is a testament to our success in raising you. Our goal was to instill in you the belief that every individual, regardless of their sexual orientation, whether gay, straight, bisexual, lesbian, or any other letter in the LGBTQ+ acronym, is perfectly normal." The look in my father's eyes reassured me of his unwavering love and acceptance.

My mom opens her mouth, then shuts it. She looked like she wanted to cry. Dad squeezes her, then she says, "Marty, I carried you in me for 9 months. I spent twenty-four hours in labor. Nothing in this world will ever make me love you any less. I told you at the hospital that I will love you no matter whom you choose to love." My eyes started blurring from impeded water works.

As I rose from the table and gently tucked in my chair, I met my parents' gaze with sincere eyes. "I want us to be on the same wavelength, Mom and Dad. I have genuine feelings for Ty, and I hope to make you proud by being the best partner and having him as mine. What I'm trying to convey is that I'm gay."

My Dad jumps up from the table causing the chair to make a god awful scraping sound as it slides across the patio floor, "Oh my god, Chelsea, our son is HAPPY! Oh god," He pretends to be faint and applaud, “we need to call one of conversion therapy camps and fix this before his HAPPINESS spreads like a contagious virus or maybe if we go quickly, we can pray to the BBQ gods and put some steaks before them so they can tell us the answers to stop this HAPPINESS once and for all.”

Mom goes around the table to give me a hug, and tells dad, "Theodore, you can be so dramatic. I sometimes I wonder what you do when I am not home." chuckling dad simply says, "Things I cannot openly say around our son." Mom's eyes grew wide, and she did a dry heave and looks at me, "Maybe we should sanitize the furniture, or burn it later."

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"Why didn't you break up with Sarah on the video call instead of leading her on?" Nick's words hung heavy in the air, a cloud of doubt obscuring the fading embers of the fire pit. I turned him towards me, needing his gaze, needing him to see the truth behind my actions.

"Nick," I began, my voice firm but gentle, "I am a gentleman. I have moral values. Something like breaking up, something so important, should come face-to-face. I wouldn't disrespect her by doing it over a screen."

Nick met my gaze, a flicker of understanding replacing the initial judgment. He held his hand out, palm up, and I grasped it, feeling the warmth of his acceptance. "I was wrong about you," he confessed, a genuine smile breaking through the tension. "I was wrong to doubt you. I give you my blessing."

The weight of his words lifted, leaving me feeling lighter, freer. It was time. Time to face Tyler. Finally, claim the truth that had been whispering within me for so long.

We walked back inside, the familiar scent of wood smoke clinging to our clothes, a silent promise of the warmth we were about to share. As we entered the living room, I turned to the stereo, my fingers hovering over the button to press play. But I paused, needing to make this moment perfect, needing to show Tyler how much he meant to me.

"Tyler?" I whispered, my eyes searching his. "May I have this dance?"

He looked at me, a bewildered expression on his face, then his gaze fell to my hand, his hand trembling as he reached out and took mine. He blushed, his cheeks burning red. "I... I don't know how to dance country," he stammered, voice barely a whisper.

"Just step on the toes of my boots," I instructed, a playful grin spreading across my face. "Don't worry, I'll guide you."

He was hesitant, a flicker of doubt crossing his eyes, but he did as I asked, his hand clasped tightly in mine. As we stood there, ready to dance, a strange, almost magical energy pulsed through the room. It was like the air itself charged with a new energy, a potent mix of anticipation and hope.

I pressed play, and the rich, soulful chords of Josh Turner's "Be Your Man" filled the room.

Tyler stumbled slightly, his body tense, but I held him close, my heart pounding in my chest, a mixture of nervous excitement and sheer joy. And then, the music, the close embrace, the warmth of his body against mine, something clicked.

The world faded away, leaving just us, the melody, and the gentle sway of our bodies. Tyler's initial awkwardness melted away, replaced by a gentle grace as we moved in sync. His eyes, once filled with doubt, were now bright with hope, with joy.

He leaned his head against my shoulder, his breath hitching with emotion. A single tear traced its way down his cheek, but instead of sadness, there was a glimmer of happiness, of relief.

"Don't worry," he whispered, his voice barely audible. "It's a happy tear."

I felt a wave of tenderness wash over me. I held him tighter, my hand resting on the small of his back, his body warm and yielding against mine.

And then, he leaned in, his lips brushing against mine, the warmth of his touch sending shivers down my spine.

We were dancing; we were in love, and all the doubts and fears, the whispers, and the uncertainties, had all faded away, replaced by the sweet, undeniable reality of our love. This was the moment, the turning point. This was where our story truly began.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

## “Special Bulletin Alert”

We are interrupting our regular programming to bring you a breaking news report. The Midway and Calallen Police Departments are asking the public to be on the lookout for a potentially dangerous individual. The suspect described as an 18 to 25-year-old male, approximately six feet tall, weighing around 170 pounds, with ear-length black hair and brown eyes. Believed to be armed and extremely dangerous."

"Members of the LGBTQ+ community are being asked to exercise extreme precaution if you are attending public and private events. Every member of all the surrounding communities, regardless of sexual orientation, should not walk alone at night,

"This is a developing situation, and we will continue to update you as more information becomes available."

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The news bulletin, a stark, unfiltered glimpse into the world, sent a shiver down my spine. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up, each one a tiny antenna quivering with apprehension. Tyler, stretched out longways on the sofa, his head resting on my lap, tensed. His heart rate and breathing quickened. I felt the tremor in his body, a tangible manifestation of his inner turmoil. I knew, with a certainty that went beyond mere intuition, that the newscaster's words had triggered a painful memory, a haunting echo from a past I could never fully comprehend.

The bulletin ended, replaced by the familiar opening theme of our medical drama. The familiar faces on the screen were a welcome distraction, a temporary balm for the wounds of reality. "What are you thinking, Ty?" I asked, my voice a gentle caress as I rubbed his upper arm, the familiar routine a silent reassurance. He didn't answer, his eyes fixed on the flickering images, lost in a world where the past and the present collided. He knew I wouldn't press, that my silence was a haven, a refuge for him to navigate the swirling currents of his own memories. He knew I was there, a steadfast anchor in the storm.

As the season finale of our binge-watching marathon ended, I stretched, my body aching for a moment of respite. "Can I get up, Ty?" I asked, a playful lilt in my voice, though the need to relieve my bladder was real and pressing. He shook his head, a stubborn refusal. "But, babe, I really need to go!" I pleaded; my voice laced with mock desperation. He pressed his head harder into my lap, a firm, silent refusal. "Nope. You're trapped here until I say you can go."

Desperate, I shucked my legs, attempting to bounce his head gently, mimicking the little dance kids perform when they must use the bathroom. He flipped onto his back, his gaze locking onto mine, a flicker of something dark in his eyes. He placed his hand on my cheek, a light touch, but the energy that flowed from him sent a jolt through me. I lay my hand over his, mirroring his gesture, the intimacy a silent bridge between us. He brushed his thumb over my chin, the familiar caress a trigger, a ripple that sent a wave of fear washing over him. The scent of terror, acrid and potent, filled the air, a tangible manifestation of the darkness that consumed him.

I knew instantly what he was thinking, what phantom was haunting him, what nightmare he was reliving. I gathered him close, lifting him onto my lap, holding him tight against my chest. "Ty, come here," I said, my voice firm, resolute. I kissed him, a long, slow kiss that enveloped him in my love, a tangible expression of the strength I held for him. I felt his tension melt away, the shadows in his eyes slowly receding. "Ty, no one, not even that monster, is ever going to touch you again. God is my witness. I will fight tooth and nail to protect you. I promise you this: he will never win a fight against me and him. Do you know why he will never win, Ty?"

He looked at me, his eyes searching, a question in his gaze. "No," he whispered, his voice barely audible.

"Because I fight with this," I said, taking his hand in mine, guiding his finger to my heart, "for this," I said, moving his finger to his heart. He gave me a dimpled smile, the first sign of normalcy returning to his features. He straddled me on the couch, his kiss a fierce storm, a passionate reclaiming of the present. He pulled back, gasping for breath, his eyes dark with need. "Why did you stop?" I asked, my voice a breathless whisper. He gave me a quick, malicious grin, a playful glint in his eye. He leaned in, his lips trailing down my cheek, his touch lingering on my earlobe, the whisper of his breath sending a shiver down my spine. When he kissed the sensitive skin behind my ear, a low groan escaped his lips, a primal sound that resonated deep within me. I was putty in his hands, my defenses crumbling under the onslaught of his desire.

Our make-out session ended in a flurry of breathless laughter, the tension dissipating like smoke in the wind. He jumped off me, a mischievous twinkle in his eye. I blushed, unable to avoid the telltale evidence of his arousal, his member straining against the fabric of his jeans. He looked down, embarrassed, and I mirrored his gesture, my body responding in kind. He grabbed my hand, his touch warm and reassuring. "I don't mind if we rub through clothes," he said, his voice husky with desire, "but in time, I'll be ready for more."

I pulled him closer, my arms wrapping around his waist. "We can go as slow as you want," I said, my voice soft and tender. He chuckled, a lighthearted sound that eased the tension between us. I stood up, my shirt clinging to my damp skin. "I feel like swimming," I said, my voice a playful tease. I turned, heading towards the back door that led to the pool. "Do you care to join?" I called over my shoulder, a challenge in my voice.

Before I reached the door, he grabbed my hand, his touch a silent affirmation, a promise. Together, we jumped into the cool water, the shock of the cold a fleeting sensation, quickly replaced by the warmth of our embrace. The water embraced us, a sanctuary from the world, a space where we could be ourselves, together, free from the shadows of the past, united by the promise of a future we would build together.

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The cool air kissed my skin as I climbed out of the pool, the water clinging to my body like a second skin. Tyler, his face flushed with exertion, pulled me close, his warmth a welcome contrast to the crisp breeze. "Thank you for taking my mind off the news bulletin," he said, his voice husky with a mixture of gratitude and exhaustion.

I leaned up, my lips brushing against his forehead. "You're welcome," I whispered, savoring the feeling of him against me. We stood there for a moment; the silence broken only by the gentle lapping of water against the pool's edge.

Instead of a kiss, he wrapped his arms around me, his touch grounding me. I rested my head on his shoulder, and we swayed back and forth, the rhythm of our movements a comforting counterpoint to the swirling thoughts in my head. The news bulletin had been a relentless assault of images and words - a suspect at large, armed, and dangerous, a chilling reminder of the world's unpredictable nature. But Tyler's presence, his gentle warmth, was a shield against the storm.

I could feel him trembling, the cold seeping through his skin. "Go upstairs and shower," I said, my voice laced with concern. "I'll make you some tea. You can find some clothes in my room. The dresser directly in front of the door has a pair of khaki shorts in the top drawer. There's a pack of boxers in the second drawer, and you can borrow any of my shirts from the closet."

He nodded, his lips curving into a small smile. "Okay," he murmured, his voice thick with fatigue.

As he disappeared up the stairs, the familiar sounds of the house seemed amplified in the quiet of the late afternoon. The soft hum of the refrigerator, the distant ticking of the clock on the wall, all suddenly felt more pronounced, more tangible.

The news bulletin was a loop playing in my mind, the words blurring into an anxious mantra. What if… what if the suspect… what if it was someone I knew? I shook my head, trying to shake off the intrusive thoughts. The world was a vast and unpredictable place, and the likelihood of such a thing happening to me was slim. But the news, like an unwelcome guest, refused to leave.

The kettle on the stove whistled, a sharp, insistent sound that cut through my musings. I moved towards the kitchen, the rhythmic splashing of the shower a reassuring counterpoint to the quiet anxieties swirling within me.

A sharp knock at the door startled me, my breath catching in my throat. The news bulletin replayed in my mind, the image of the suspect, his face obscured by shadows, a chilling vision of a man who could be anyone, anywhere. I turned towards the door, my heart pounding a frantic rhythm against my ribs. Who could it be at this hour?

A wave of irrational fear washed over me, the thought of Tyler's ex, Justin, flitting across my mind like a fleeting shadow. But then I forced myself to think rationally. Justin wouldn't know where I lived. He wouldn't be here.

The turning of the lock sent a shiver down my spine. I reached for a heavy statue, its weight a comforting assurance against the unknown. The door swung open, and I braced myself for the worst. But it wasn't Justin.

It was Stacy. "Marty, I used the spare key your mom gave me!" she exclaimed, her voice bright and breezy, oblivious to the tension I was struggling to contain. Her gaze swept over me, landing on my bare chest. "Why are you shirtless? Oh, am I interrupting sexy time?"

My face flushed, my grip on the statue loosening. "We just got out of the pool," I stammered, "and I was making tea while Tyler is upstairs taking a shower."

"Boy, it's nearly twenty-two degrees outside," she exclaimed, her voice laced with a mixture of disbelief and thinly veiled amusement. "And you two just want to jump in the pool so you can catch gonorrhea, don't you?"

I snorted, "First, it's seventy-two degrees outside. And second, you catch pneumonia, not gonorrhea, when it's cold outside and wet."

She raised an eyebrow; her smile widening. "First, it says twenty-two degrees on my dashboard in the car, and I'm cold just walking outside without this jacket on. And second, are you going to stay shirtless, because I have a dirty mind, and I can quickly conjure up Brokeback Mountain in my head?"

My laughter echoed in the quiet house, a wave of relief washing over me, the tension dissolving like sugar in hot water. "It says twenty-two degrees because your dumbass doesn't know how to change the Celsius to Fahrenheit in your car settings," I retorted, ignoring her blatant innuendo.

The kettle shrieked, a shrill reminder of the mundane world that existed beyond the anxieties and fears that had gripped me. "Do you want some tea?" I asked Stacy, her presence a welcome distraction from the swirling thoughts that had plagued me.

She shook her head, "Sparkling juice, please."

As I prepared the tea, her voice, laced with a mixture of surprise and amusement, broke the quiet. "Oh my god, Marty, come look at how handsome your boy is!"

I dropped the spoon, my heart suddenly racing. I rushed towards the stairs, my eyes searching for Tyler. And then I saw him.

He stood at the top of the stairs, his presence commanding attention. He was wearing a pair of boots that my grandparents had given me, boots that had been too small for me, but fit him perfectly. A pair of jeans, the kind I never wore, the faded denim stressing the lean lines of his legs. And a red and white button-up shirt, the sleeves rolled up to reveal his biceps. A belt buckle, one of my favorites, with a brown belt to match the boots, a touch of old-fashioned charm that seemed to belong to him. A red and black baseball cap, adorned with my previous school's mascot sat jauntily on his head.

He was a vision, a transformation that left me breathless. My mouth hung open, words failing me. The memory of our first encounter, the same sense of awe and wonder, flooded back, stronger than ever.

Stacy cut through my reverie. "You look amazing, Tyler," she declared, her voice filled with genuine admiration. "This look totally suits you. I approve."

Tyler blushed, a shy smile gracing his lips. "Thanks, Stac."

I walked towards him, my heart pounding in my chest. I reached out, my fingers brushing against his arm, the warmth of his skin sending a thrill through me. "You look amazing, babe," I whispered, drawing him in for a kiss.

It was a long kiss, a kiss that lingered long after the world had ceased to exist, a kiss that transported us to a place where nothing else mattered.

Stacy, ever the observer, chuckled. "Yeah, I'm definitely watching Brokeback Mountain tonight, and touching myself."

Tyler and I both looked at her, our faces a mix of amusement and disgust. "EWWW!"

Stacy threw her hands up in the air, pointing at us. "Well, with you shirtless and Tyler fucking hot as hell, what is a girl supposed to do?" She paused, then continued, "Oh wait, speaking of which, I meant to tell you earlier, Marty, before I got distracted with this," she gestured towards my bare chest, "I need you two to get dressed. Well, you, Marty, to get dressed, because damn, he's hot."

She paused, her eyes lingering on Tyler. "We are going on a double date. We leave in an hour, so chop chop Marty, go do some crunches, or push-ups, or whatever you do in the shower to look like this."

I turned to Tyler; my eyebrows raised in question. "Did you know she was coming over to tell me about this double date?"

He looked at me, a shrug conveying his ignorance. "She might have texted me before I jumped in the shower."

Stacy's words echoed in my mind. "A double date.” The thought of being seen in public with Tyler, his arm around my waist, his presence radiating confidence and magnetism, sent a jolt of excitement through me. A double date. It was a small step, an insignificant event, but it felt like a pivotal moment, a sign of something new, something real, something that had the potential to change everything.

CHAPTER TWELVE

"Tyler! It's just like driving a car, only difference is you're higher!" I gripped the dashboard, my knuckles white as Tyler, my boyfriend, wrestling to get Roger Rabbit 2 into a parking spot. "I don't understand why you needed to get a new truck that's much higher than your old one, any higher, and I think you can use your truck at a monster truck rally." He says as he unbuckles his seat belt.

"You know you are cute right," I said, trying to distract him from the sheer absurdity of the situation.

He blushed, "Stop, I already have a self-esteem issue, and you're just going to make it worse." We hopped out of our truck and started walking to meet Stacy.

I laughed. "Self-esteem issue, you say?" I cupped my hands around my mouth and projected my voice louder. "I HAVE THE HOTTEST BOYFRIEND IN THE WORLD!"

Tyler pulled away from me, his cheeks the color of a ripe tomato, and started running towards Stacy's car as she pulled up. He jumped into her car, looking like a deer caught in headlights.

I heard Stacy laughing, and she popped up, "Stop harassing your boy toy before you turn him straight, and then I have to take him in like a stray puppy."

Tyler, with the most pathetic puppy dog eyes I had ever seen, got out of Stacy's car, and shuffled towards me.

I laughed and beckoned him closer, "Come here, you big lug."

He shuffled over, his face a study in both embarrassment and relief. He looked at me, his eyes a mix of apprehension and adoration. I reached out and kissed him softly.

“See,” I whispered in his ear, “you can't resist me.”

He chuckled and kissed me back.

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The air hung heavy with unspoken questions. It was the silence that settled between us, a trio bound by a shared history, a bond forged in laughter and late-night talks, but now tinged with a melancholic undercurrent.

"So Stacy, how did you meet this dude that we are meeting?" Tyler asked, his voice a gentle ripple in the stillness.

"At the mall," Stacy answered, a faint blush coloring her cheeks. "I was shopping with my parents and dropped my phone. I went to go pick it up, and he had beaten me to it. Our hands brushed against each other."

I looked at her, a flicker of concern in my eyes. “This isn’t your first date with him, is it?"

“No, it's our fourth date in two weeks,” she said, her smile a touch strained.

Tyler’s brow furrowed, worry etched into his face. I saw the flicker of apprehension in his eyes, a reflection of my own. I reached for his pinky, intertwining our fingers, and placed our hands on the plush cushion of the booth. The gesture, small and silent, held the weight of unspoken reassurances.

As if summoned by our unspoken fears, Stacy's phone buzzed, the screen illuminating her face with a cold, blue glow. She snatched it up; her smile fading as she typed. Her fingers danced over the keyboard, a flurry of unseen words, their message etched in the lines of her worried brow.

When she finished, she looked up at us, her eyes reflecting a wave of disappointment. "Matthew won't be making it tonight. His brother is sick, and his mom couldn't get off work like she had hoped."

I reached out to Stacy, my touch a silent promise of support. "Come on, let’s get out of here," I said, my voice firm, yet gentle. I pulled Tyler’s hand by his pinky, placing it on the table as well. "I have two dates," I announced, a mischievous grin spreading across my face. "One beautiful, like the stars in the night sky, and one hotter than the star in the day sky."

They both smirked, a faint echo of amusement flickering in their eyes. "Let's go clubbing?" I suggested, hoping to inject some life into the deflated mood.

But even though my compliment was genuine, the sting of Matthew’s cancellation hung heavy in the air. Stacy’s spirit remained subdued. We abandoned the idea of clubbing and instead retreated to the sanctuary of our shared home.

The familiar comfort of the patio offered a temporary haven. I suggested we fire up the projector and watch a movie on the wall in the entertainment room. But Stacy declined, her eyes clouded with a quiet sadness.

As the evening deepened, I found myself alone with Tyler; the silence punctuated by the rhythmic chirping of crickets. I could sense a growing unease in him, a mirroring of the unease swirling within me.

“What if this whole thing is just a prelude to something else?” Tyler asked, his voice barely a whisper.

I turned to him, the question hanging heavy in the air. I could see the fear behind his words, the unspoken question he was afraid to ask.

“I don’t know, Tyler,” I confessed, my voice filled with a raw vulnerability. “But that’s the beauty of it. The unknown is the only real adventure.”

His gaze, filled with a mix of curiosity and apprehension, mirrored my own internal struggle.

“I'm not sure I can handle the unknown, not anymore.”

I placed a hand on his shoulder, my touch a silent promise of shared strength. “It’s not about handling it, Tyler. It’s about embracing it. It’s about letting go and trusting that whatever comes, we'll face it together.”

Our eyes met; a silent pact sealed in the twilight. It was a pact that spoke of a shared journey, a promise to navigate the unpredictable currents of fate together.

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The phone's insistent buzz vibrated through my dream, a jarring intrusion that morphed into the deafening roar of a jet engine sputtering in the night. I answered without even looking, "Hello?" It was Stacy, her voice a ragged whisper that sent chills down my spine. "Stacy, what's wrong? Where are you?" My voice, a shaky tremor, broke through the dream's fading echoes. I scrambled out of bed. “Tyler, wake up!” He was already up, worry etched across his face. Stacy didn't answer, only the frantic rasp of her breath filling the space between us.

"Stacy, if you can't talk right now, because you're hiding from someone, press a number on your phone," I whispered, a terrifying knot tightening in my stomach. Her line echoed with a long, drawn-out press—the signal of distress.

"Okay, Stacy, listen to me. Be super quiet, but I'm going to ask you a series of questions. Don't talk, just listen closely. I'm going to speak low, so whoever's with you doesn't hear me.” I took a shaky breath, my heart pounding against my ribs. "Tyler, get my journal off my desk."

He jumped out of bed, his movements a blur, and came back to sit beside me. "There's a pen in it. We're going to write the questions and use long press for yes and short press for no."

"Stacy, answer with long press for yes, short press for no, okay?" The silence stretched, then a long press—good, she understood. "Stacy, are you at home? No. Okay, are you hurt? Yes. Are you losing blood? No. Are any of your feet or legs broken, twisted or sprained? Yes. Are you able to limp? No. Are you within five miles of our house? Yes. Are you hiding from Matthew?"

Another long press.

Panic flooded me, a wave crashing over my defenses. Matthew, the man who had been nothing but trouble for Stacy, had hurt her. She couldn't walk. "Go grab my dad, tell him it's a Code 70.” Tyler looked at me, confusion clouding his eyes. "Tyler, Dad will know what you're talking about. Just knock on the door hard and tell him, word for word, 'Stacy is dealing with a Code 70.’ Go now!"

"Okay, Stacy, listen to me. Is Matthew alone? No. How many people were with him? Short press for how many?" Two short presses. “Fuck.” Stacy, are you in your car? No. Is your car anywhere near you? Yes. "Good, we have ground." Stacy, are you within two hundred feet of your car? Yes. "Great!"

Dad burst into the room, Tyler trailing behind him, eyes wide with alarm. I filled him in on everything I knew. "Okay," he said, his voice a low rumble.

He left the room and Mom came in; her face a mask of concern. "Oh my God, is she okay, Marty?"

"She's on the phone, Mom. Go ahead, talk to her."

My mom took the phone, her voice soothing. "Stacy, honey, I know you’re scared. We are going to help you, okay? Just don't move, and when we get closer to you, whatever you hear, stay completely hidden until we call you with a safe word. Long press for yes, you understand. Good honey, the safe word is going to be 'red roses.’ I'm going to give the phone back to Marty."

Mom handed me the phone and turned to Tyler. "Tyler, honey, I need you to call your brother, okay? Tell him, 'Stars are flying.' It must be you that tells him. He'll tell you something and repeat it to me. I must be in the other room, but call him right now, okay?"

Tyler looked bewildered. I knew my parents were thorough, but I didn't know they talked to Nick about our emergency plans. Mom looks at Tyler again. "Tyler, just do it, okay?"

Tyler called his brother. "Stars are flying," he said, his voice strained. He put the phone down on the bed and ran out to the hall. I could barely hear him say, "Nick told me, he didn't find any whiskers?"

Mom sighed with relief and grabbed Tyler's phone. She started barking orders at Nick. "Lockdown house, close all window shades, use only lights that do not face any windows, and lock all the doors." She hung up the phone, her gaze fixed on me. "Are you ready for this? We've worked on this since you were a kid. Can you protect your boyfriend, Marty?"

I took a deep breath, the familiar tightness of the situation settling in my chest. "Yes, Mom."

She kissed my forehead and turned to Tyler. He was looking at me with a confused, almost angry expression. Mom kissed his forehead, too. “I hope this doesn't change the way you look at Marty, or us. We'll explain everything once we get Stacy out of harm's way and the guys who are doing this behind bars. Trust Marty, and trust me when I say that Marty will keep his promise to you. He will protect you tooth and nails. He loves you, and I saw it the moment you said yes in the living room. I hope to make you my son-in-law when the time is ready.”

Tyler's eyes welled up.

Mom came back to me, Dad by her side, and asked for my phone. She handed it to Dad. "Marty, remember aim small, miss small." She then looked at me with a grave expression. "Do you remember your code words for all clear and not clear?"

I nodded. "Yes, Mom."

"Be safe and watch Dad's back." She smiled. "He'd be a chicken without his head if I was here."

I laughed. "Love you, Mom."

She squeezed my hand and Tyler's. "Always." She turned and went to the door. The front door slammed shut, leaving a chilling emptiness in its wake. I felt eyes burning into me. Tyler stood behind me, his face a mask of fury, a fury aimed at me. And in that moment, I realized this was no ordinary rescue mission. This was something far more complicated, something that stretched far beyond the confines of reality itself. This was a code, a secret language whispered in the shadows, a battle fought not on the streets but on the very fabric of existence. This was a fight for Stacy's life, a fight for our love, a fight for the very essence of our souls. And I was ready to fight.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The air was thick with unspoken accusations, a silent storm brewing in Tyler's eyes. He paced the living room, his every step a thunderclap in the stillness. I felt like a fugitive, caught in the crosshairs of his suspicion. He saw me as a traitor, a betrayer. It was a familiar feeling, one that mirrored the unspoken truth that gnawed at me - the truth I had kept from him, and from myself, for so long.

"Tell me everything now," he commanded, his voice a harsh tremor. "Or we are done."

"You don't mean that, do you?" I dared to challenge my voice a mere whisper.

But his stern gaze never wavered. "Marty, I need to know. Why does Nick have code words with your mother? Why do you know them? What the hell is a Code 70? Why did your mother tell me you knew what to do? Why didn't your parents call the police officers? I have so many questions. Just tell me. Is your name even really Marty Villarreal?"

My head bowed under the weight of his words, his relentless interrogation. I knew this was my fault. The silence, the secrets, the layers of untruths I'd woven into my life. The truth was a tangled mess, and I didn't know where to begin.

The wrongness of my silence was clear in Tyler's reaction. He rose from the coffee table, his eyes wide with a fear that chilled me to the bone. My throat tightened, tears threatening to spill, but I held them back.

"Do you even lik - " he faltered, his voice cracking. "Love me?"

The question hung between us, raw and painful. It was a wound he'd inflicted on himself, but it bled into me, staining my heart with doubt.

"Do you think I wanted to keep this from you?" I spat, the anger finally breaking through the dam of my composure. His words were a betrayal of the trust I'd thought we shared.

Tyler recoiled; his eyes wide with shock. He was used to being the one who hurt, the one who unleashed the storms. My anger surprised him, and I realized that in this moment, he saw me as a stranger, a creature he no longer recognized.

I sank onto the sofa, tears finally finding their way. I took a deep breath, feeling the weight of years of silence lift from my shoulders.

"My parents used to be CIA, before I was born," I began, my voice calmer now, a dull ache settling in my chest. "Something happened on a mission, a mission they weren't even supposed to be on together, and it put them in a tight spot. They weren't supposed to be in the same city. They weren't even supposed to know each other."

Tyler sat beside me, his presence a balm to my wounded spirit. He didn't touch me, but his proximity was a silent promise of support, a tangible thread of hope in the chaos of my confession.

"I wasn't supposed to know about any of this," I continued, my voice a low murmur. "But one year, I was snooping for Christmas presents, and I found some case files in Dad's office. It all started there."

My eyes fell to my feet, tracing the intricate patterns of the rug, the familiar comfort grounding me in the reality of this moment, despite the surreal nature of the unfolding story.

"I started searching online, late at night," I whispered, my voice barely a breath. "And one night, someone came to our house. We knew him as Uncle Paul, but it was so strange. There were no pictures of him in our family albums, and he didn't look like Dad at all, not even remotely like a brother. I was curious. So I ordered DNA test kits, using Dad's credit card, and I tricked Uncle Paul into swabbing himself, telling him it was super spicy pepper juice. Only real men could handle it. I swabbed my parents' toothbrushes and floss."

I paused, hoping for a flicker of understanding in Tyler's eyes, a spark of compassion. I needed him to hold me, to tell me it would be okay, but all I saw reflected my uncertainty, a deep well of questions, a quiet storm of emotion.

"The results came back. My parents were my parents, but Uncle Paul was not my uncle," I finished, the words falling from my lips like pebbles into a still pond, rippling outwards, creating a pattern of truth that would forever alter our reality.

It was then that Tyler's hand reached out, hesitantly, tentatively, finding mine and holding it tight. The warmth of his touch sent a shiver down my spine, a bittersweet relief. I wanted him to hold me closer, but I understood his restraint, the cautiousness in his touch.

"He came to our house for Dad's birthday," I continued, my voice a steady rhythm now, the fear of the unknown slowly receding. "But when I started asking him about their childhood, he realized I knew something. He pulled me aside and told me to leave it alone, for the sake of the family."

Tyler was drawing circles on the inside of my hand, his touch gentle, reassuring. He was still there, still listening, still trying to understand.

"On his way home, he called my parents," I whispered, a fresh wave of anxiety washing over me. "I overheard Dad telling Mom that Uncle Paul was being followed. Then Dad heard gunshots over the phone. Dad became frantic. 'How did they find him?' he yelled. 'Are we being followed too? Is Marty in danger?' Mom started crying, and Dad was pacing the kitchen, his voice a frantic whisper, “How did they find him?”

My own heart started to race, reliving the terror of that night. It was a night that forever changed our lives.

"I felt so scared," I confessed, my voice trembling. "So I approached my parents with the articles I printed, and the DNA results. Their faces went white. They panicked, their scared. They finally understood that I was simply curious, that I wanted to know why they were so secretive, why they were always so guarded. But we couldn't stay there anymore, not with the danger that followed us. So we moved. We came to Grand Valley. We changed our names to Villarreal. My parents stayed home, but I learned to fight, how to handle weapons, how to protect myself. We trained, practiced for this kind of emergency, for the possibility of a world where we couldn't trust anyone. I never thought I would use any of it. Fighting but my parents made sure I understood that fighting should only protect the life of myself, or others’ lives, never to fight bullies just because I knew how, and fighting at school forbidden".

I finished my story, my voice a weary whisper. I looked at Tyler, his eyes filled with a mixture of sorrow, fear, and a glimmer of something else, something I couldn't quite name.

Tyler sat up, his gaze unwavering, his eyes searching mine for a truth that transcended the words I had spoken. He kissed me then, a gentle, searching kiss that spoke of forgiveness, of understanding. I took aback, my heart fluttering with a newfound hope.

"What was that for?" I asked, my voice a soft tremor.

He didn't answer, but his lips found mine again, this time with a deeper intensity, a yearning that echoed the storm of emotions swirling within me.

He pulled my shirt off, his hands moving over my skin with a tender reverence. He traced the contours of my chest, his touch sending a wave of heat through me. His fingers found their way to the button of my pants, his gaze locking with mine. A silent question hanging in the air.

I stopped him, my heart pounding in my chest. This was too much, too fast, too soon, and the wrong time. But the passion in his eyes, the raw, unfiltered desire, ignited a fire within me. A fire that had been smoldering for so long, held back by secrets and fears.

I pulled his shirt off, the weight of his gaze a heavy burden on my shoulders. I kissed his chest, my tongue tracing the outline of his nipples, a primal dance of pleasure and pain. He groaned, his hips moving in a rhythmic sway, echoing the beat of my heart.

He stood, pulling me close, his body a warm, solid presence against mine. We shuffled up the stairs, the rhythm of our footsteps a testament to the unspoken desires that now flowed between us. But I couldn't wait any longer, the tension building within me.

I shed my pants, the soft material falling to the floor. Tyler followed suit, his gaze never leaving mine. He lowered himself onto a step on the stairs, the perfect height, and he slipped my boxers off, tossing them aside. His eyes were a dark pool of desire, reflecting the storm of emotions raging inside me.

He leaned in, kissing my inner thighs, his lips sending shivers down my spine. His tongue traced a path towards the center of my longing, his touch sending a jolt of electricity through me. He cupped my base, his fingers tight, his thumb tracing a sensual pattern on my skin.

He took me in, his mouth a warm embrace, his tongue swirling around me, his throat working with an almost painful intensity. I moaned, my body arching involuntarily, my own hands finding their way through his hair, pulling him closer, desperate for more.

He moved his head, his rhythm relentless, his touch a symphony of pleasure. I lost myself, my thoughts dissolving into a whirlwind of sensations. His touch, his taste, his scent, all woven together into a tapestry of pleasure.

With a long, primal moan, I released, my load flowing into his mouth, his throat. The world around me faded away, the weight of my secrets momentarily forgotten, replaced by the sheer joy of being consumed, devoured by his desire.

He continued to suck on me, his lips tracing a path from my base to my tip, a lingering warmth that sparked a new wave of sensation within me. He finally released his hold, his gaze meeting mine, his eyes reflecting a mirrored pleasure.

I shifted, pulling him into my lap. I kissed his cheek, his chin, his neck, my tongue trailing a fiery path down his chest, my fingers gently teasing his nipples. He arched against me, a low growl escaping his lips, a testament to the pleasure I was causing him.

I moved down his chest, my lips finding their way to his belly button, my tongue dancing along the trail of hair that led to his pants. I pulled his pants down, revealing the smooth, taut skin of his thighs. He wasn't wearing underwear. I smirked, the sight of his readiness sending a spark of excitement through me.

"That's so hot, Ty," I whispered, my voice husky with desire. "You surprise me every day."

I blew air on his balls, teasing him, watching his hips rock in protest, a silent plea for more. He grabbed the back of my head, pulling me closer, trying to force me onto his cock. But I was enjoying this, the power I held in my hands, the way he hungered for me.

I moved my hand to his balls, gently cupping them, my thumb tracing a path around his sac. I licked one ball, then the other, my tongue dancing across his skin, savoring the texture, the scent. He moaned, his chest arching, his body trembling with the intensity of the pleasure.

I slipped both balls into my mouth, my tongue moving between them. A rhythmic dance of pleasure that sent shivers through his body. He arched his back, a low growl escaping his throat, a primal sound that resonated with the primal urge burning within me.

"Suck me, please, Marty, please!" he pleaded, his voice ragged with desire, his body trembling with anticipation.

I felt a surge of power, a new wave of excitement coursing through me. This was the first time I'd played with another man's favorite tugging toy, and the thrill of it, the way it made him writhe with pleasure, sent a thrill through me.

I teased him, my tongue circling his head, my lips tracing a path down his length, savoring the way he quivered with anticipation. Then I took him in, my mouth engulfing his head, my tongue swirling around his tip, my nose brushing against his trimmed hair.

"Fuck, that feels so much better than I expected," he gasped, his voice a mix of pleasure and surprise.

His words were a confirmation, a testament to the power I held in my hands, the way I could make him feel, the way I could bring him to his knees.

I continued to suck him, my rhythm steady, my passion burning brightly. His body throbbed against my mouth, the sensation of his tip hitting the back of my throat sending a wave of pleasure through me. His moans filled the room, a symphony of desire that echoed my own.

I felt a tingling sensation, a wave of warmth spreading through my body. My cock was hard again, leaking with anticipation. I used my thumb to massage my tip, a primal urge to release building within me.

I pulled back, my eyes meeting his, my gaze seeking confirmation, a silent request for permission to explore this new world of pleasure. His eyes were wild, filled with a lust that mirrored my own. He didn't stop me, his body arching, his gaze fixed on mine.

I licked his hole, my tongue tracing a path around his rim, the sensation of his tight muscles gripping my tongue sending a jolt of excitement through me. He gasped, his body trembling, his hips swaying in a rhythmic dance of anticipation.

I slicked my finger with my leakage, my heart pounding in my chest, the anticipation building with each second. I took him in my mouth once more, the taste of his sweetness a heady mix of pleasure and anticipation.

Then, slowly, I inserted my finger into his hole, my finger pushing deeper, deeper, until I felt the tightness of his prostate. He moaned, a primal sound that shook his entire body, his hips bucking against me, his body trembling with the force of his release.

I slid my finger out, my mouth closing over the last of his load, savoring the taste of his pleasure. He was breathing hard, his body still trembling, his eyes wide with a mixture of exhaustion and satisfaction.

Then, unexpectedly, he started to cry. My heart sank, the panic rising in my throat. Had I gone too far? Had I hurt him? Had I ruined everything? He shook his head, trying to catch his breath, tears streaming down his cheeks.

I pulled back, my hand reaching out to him, to comfort him, to assure him that everything would be okay. But he pulled me closer, his arms wrapping around me, his body trembling against mine.

He kissed me, a tender, reassuring kiss that spoke of forgiveness, of understanding. He looked into my eyes, his gaze intense, his eyes holding a truth that transcended the words he had spoken.

"I love you, Marty Villarreal," he whispered, his voice thick with emotion. "I will always love you. And I will tell you that every day."

I kissed him back, a gentle, reassuring kiss that echoed his own. "Tyler Austin Walker," I whispered, my voice filled with a love that defied all reason, all logic, all fear. "I will never tire of you telling me you love me. Because I love you too. Forever and always."

We gathered ourselves, our clothes scattered around us, a testament to the storm of emotions that had swept over us. We moved towards my room, the rhythm of our steps a testament to the new rhythm we had found, a rhythm that would guide us through the unknown, a rhythm that would carry us through the storm.

We slipped into the shower, the warmth of the water washing away the last vestiges of fear, the weight of secrets, the tension of the unknown. In that shower, we were just Tyler and Marty, two souls intertwined, two hearts beating as one, two lives forever bound by a love that had defied the odds and embraced the unknown.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The weight of the world seemed to settle on my shoulders as I gripped the keys to my truck, the metal cold against my palm. My pistol, a reassuring presence at my hip, was engaged, ready to become an extension of my will. Tyler stood beside me, his face pale, his eyes wide with a mixture of fear and defiance.

"Okay, Ty," I said, my voice steady despite the storm brewing inside me, "we're going to walk normally to my truck. Don't walk around it to get in the passenger seat. You'll have to slide over after getting in the driver's door. You were right, I should have gotten a lower truck. I won't be able to see you if you walk around it."

I scratched the back of my neck, a nervous habit I couldn't seem to shake. "I promise we can go vehicle shopping next weekend."

Tyler stared at me, his expression unreadable, a subtle flicker of disbelief in his eyes. He was right; I was making jokes in the face of danger, but it was a defense mechanism, a way to ward off the creeping panic.

"If anyone walks towards you when we're out of the truck, grab my pinky calmly. Don't draw attention to us, okay, babe?"

His Adam's apple bobbed nervously. "Okay, no attention."

I grabbed the door handle, and BANG BANG BANG, someone was furiously knocking on my front door. Tyler instinctively shielded himself behind me, his body pressed against my back. Another BANG BANG BANG. I slowly pressed the screen near the door to turn on the camera, and a figure shrouded in black, a mask covering their face, appeared, followed by another BANG BANG. No third bang. The figure was retreating from the steps, their hand waving a gun in the air, a silent command.

"Fuck," I muttered, my heart pounding. I tried to get a glimpse of how many were with him, but the camera angle was wrong. Panic clawed at my throat. I pulled out my phone and sent a message to my parents: "Homeland fallen."

The words felt heavy, a chilling reality I never thought I'd face. I trained for this, but the training hadn't prepared me for the fear that gripped me, for the terror that pulsed through me for the man I loved.

Tyler followed me as we moved to the kitchen, a silent understanding passing between us. I pushed him into a corner, my body shielding his as a shadow flickered past the window near the back door. When the person stopped at the door, I whispered, "Get down, Tyler, head down."

He followed my instructions, but as I took a step forward, he grabbed my pant leg. I looked down to see a single tear tracing its way down his cheek. A hushed whisper reached my ears: "I love you, Marty."

My heart twisted in my chest. I dropped, lifted his head, and met his gaze. "Ty, babe, no dark thoughts, okay? We're not saying goodbye tonight, never!"

He kissed me, a brief, desperate connection, before I slowly rose. I saw someone staring at me through the window, their features obscured by the darkness. I knew I could see them, but they couldn't see me. The person gave up trying to see anything, their presence fading into the night.

Then, I heard another person at the front door, attempting to jimmy it open, but to no avail. My worst fear then struck me, a violent crash echoing from upstairs. Someone had knocked over a lamp.

I took Tyler's hand, pulling him to the sofa. "Stay behind the couch, as close to the floor and the wall as you can. The side of the house is brick, it's a good place to keep you safe."

As I prepared to go upstairs, my phone vibrated. I checked it, and a message from my parents flashed on the screen: "Nick and Stacy were safe." Tyler’s face relaxed, a flicker of hope replacing the fear in his eyes.

I sent my parents a message: "Heart is safe, Homeland breached." The words felt hollow, a grim testament to the reality that had descended upon us.

Before I could pocket my phone, a strong hand grabbed my leg, pulling me across the carpet. A gun pointed at me. The man holding it was ugly, his features twisted, a grotesque caricature of humanity.

"Dude," I said, my voice surprisingly steady, "did your mom hate herself for having an ugly ass baby, because damn, you look like shit!"

He didn’t react to my comment verbally. Instead, his tennis shoe slammed into my stomach. I groaned, a sharp pain ripping through me, but then I laughed.

"You're going to hate yourself in a few minutes when you're sitting on that recliner over there, paralyzed from the neck down."

He hesitated; his eyes wide with a flicker of fear. He attempted to kick me again, but I grabbed his foot, twisting it before he could land the blow. He spun, his face slamming into the floor.

I got up, my muscles screaming in protest. The man struggled to his knees, gasping for breath. He stood, a vein pulsing wildly on his forehead.

"Fucking kid, I'm going to kill you, but not before I kill that fucking faggot you're protecting behind the couch!"

I felt my anger rise, a white-hot rage that fueled me. The man saw it and laughed.

"Wait, you're a fucking faggot too, aren't ya, pretty boy? Why don't I do the world a favor and get rid of two fucking cocksuckers tonight! I'll punch you so hard you'll be asking me for mercy, dirty fucking faggot! "

I snarled at him; my teeth bared. "You won't even be able to land a punch on me and what I said earlier about the recliner; that was a promise. I always keep my promises."

The man lunged, trying to land a punch, but I moved effortlessly, keeping us away from where Tyler is hiding. The man gasped for air, his body heavy with rage. He swung a kick, but I trapped his leg, elbowing his kneecap.

"Mother fucker, I'm going to enjoy watching your life drain out of your eyes!" he screamed.

I twisted his leg, sending him spinning into the recliner. He grabbed his knee, trying to stand, but fell backward into a seated position. I pulled my pistol, the weight of it a comfort in my hand. I aimed my finger tight on the trigger.

The shot echoed through the house. The man gurgled blood, gasping for air, his eyes following me, pleading, begging for something, I didn't know what.

I leaned close, my voice a chilling whisper. "I keep my promises."

Footsteps echoed from the stairs. I hid in the hallway, waiting for the intruder to reveal themselves. A figure appeared, a man staring down at the man slumped over the recliner. I recognized him, Justin, Tyler's ex, from a picture Tyler had accidentally shown me at the hospital. I never asked Tyler about him, but the image burned itself into my memory.

Justin screamed, his voice laced with fury, "Come out, you little bitch. You killed my brother, now I'm going to kill your lover! Where the fuck are you?"

He looked around, his eyes searching, before drawing a gun.

"Tyler, come out," he said, his voice dripping with false sincerity, "I just want to say I'm sorry. I want to give you my blessings on, what's his name? Oh yeah, Marty." Justin laughs, "Marrrttyyy, are you the one fucking my ex-lover? Oh wait, he's too much of a pussy to even touch a cock besides his own. Let me guess, all he wants to do is kiss. Am I right or am I right?" Justin’s voice shifted to a chilling whisper, devoid of any human emotion.

Suddenly, a shot rang out. Justin laughed, a cruel, mocking sound.

"I'm going to walk to every corner of this house, flip every piece of furniture, and if I can't flip it, well, then I'll send a bullet through it," Justin chuckles, "This is a beautiful love seat here, Marty. Have you made out with my lover here, huh? His mouth tastes so good, doesn't it? I couldn't get enough of his tongue in my mouth, or me biting his lip, drove me wild." Justin makes a moaning noise. "Hmm.... Let's see if a bullet makes the couch cry, shall we?"

Two additional gunshots resounded, showing that Tyler was not hiding beneath the couch. Justin proceeded forward; his footsteps audible as he approached the closet near the entrance.

"Marty, where is my boyfriend hiding, huh?" Justin’s voice was like nails scraping across a chalkboard. "You can come out. I just want to say thank you for looking after him."

He knocked on the closet door three times, then fired three shots. *POP, POP, POP*. I saw Tyler's head peeking out from behind the sofa. I made eye contact with him, signaling him to stay back, but in my haste to do so, I accidentally knocked over my mom’s vase. "Shit, she was going to kill me," I thought to myself. She always said it was her prize possession of Egypt. Hopefully, she’ll forgive me.

The vase shattered on the ground. *POP*! Justin spun around, his gun firing, the bullet grazing my ear. I groaned, but pressed on.

He heard me and laughed, "Found you, this is for my brother!"

He emptied the rest of his magazine into the wall I was hiding behind. *POP, POP, POP, POP, CLICK, CLICK, CLICK*. I emerged from behind the kitchen island, my pistol empty, the magazine lying on the counter. "You're out of ammo Justin, let's settle this 'mano a mano' partner," as I winked to Justin, "Unless you need a gun to feel big," as I cup my hand adjust my junk.

Justin laughed. “Oh, a tough guy I see, with your fancy cowboy boots, big ass truck with the slashed tires. Let me guess, you have a black horse named Lightning or some fucking stupid as name." Justin looks me up and down. "So you’ve been fondling and kissing my man, haven't you?"

I didn't say anything, but I watched his movements, trying to anticipate his next move, to keep Tyler safe.

"Are you a fucking mute, huh? Answer me when I ask you a question, faggot!" his voice trembled with barely contained rage.

My fists clenched tight. He took a step closer, his face inches from mine. He circled me, searching for any other weapons, but I had hidden my knife in my boot.

He stood before me, his breath hot on my face. He inhaled deeply, then exhaled, "Wow, you are a hot cowboy."

He looked down at my pants, then grabbed my crotch, squeezing hard. "Too bad Tyler doesn’t have the balls to touch this fine piece of meat."

He stepped back, a cruel grin on his face. “I’ll tell you what. You give Tyler to me, and I'll let you live. And I won’t castrate you and force you to eat your huge ass balls.”

I laughed, "Partner, you won't be walking out of here at all, let alone with Tyler."

He grinned, "Is that right, Partner?"

I nodded. Then the worst thing imaginable happened. Justin pulled out another gun, raising it towards me. But as soon as I saw it, Tyler was rushing behind Justin, clutching a heavy statue.

“Tyler, NO!!!”

Time seemed to slow down, but it was a blur. I grabbed my knife and threw it, my arm a blur of motion. Justin spun around. I heard the gunshot, *POP*! My knife landed, just off-center, on Justin’s upper back. His gun clattered to the floor as he stumbled, falling backward, taking Tyler with him.

I dropped to my knees, screaming, "NOOOO!!! WHY!!!!!"

I caught my breath, trying to force myself up. But the thought of seeing Tyler dead was unbearable, a pain so sharp, so excruciating, I couldn’t bear it. I couldn’t choose to live, I couldn’t, and I wouldn’t.

Shaking, trembling, I struggled to my feet, my eyes blurred with tears. As I looked towards Tyler, I heard, "I thought landing on carpet was supposed to soften the blow, but that shit still hurt!"

I let out a laugh, saliva and spit flying from my mouth. I stumbled towards Tyler, dropping to my knees beside him.

"Why did you do that? Why did you do something so stupid? I could have lost you!”

Tyler used my shoulders to pull himself up, sitting on the carpet. He put a hand on the back of my neck, and we were forehead to forehead. He smirked.

"You took too long. He was talking too much. And he pissed me off by touching your big balls. Those balls are mine, not his. Only I can touch those balls!"

I laughed and kissed him. "Are you hurt? Can you stand?"

We got up together. "Turn around, let me check you, babe."

I turned Tyler around, lifting his shirt to check for a bullet wound.

"Marty, look at me, I’m fine," he said, cupping my face. He kissed me. "He could have shot you, Ty."

Tyler wrapped his arms around my neck, pulling me close. He chuckled, "I don’t think my boyfriend would have gone against his promises. I mean, he even kept his promise to this dead guy on the recliner."

I hugged him tighter than ever before. "I love you, Ty."

He moaned, a low, husky sound. "I really hope that’s not a gun magazine I’m feeling pushing against my leg."

I looked down, “Nope, that’s my natural squirt gun.”

He laughed and kissed me.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Headlights sliced through the darkness on the walls, and as they illuminated the front of the house, I saw my parents sprinting towards the front door. My heart hammered against my ribs, a frantic rhythm echoing the urgency in their movements. I flung open the door, and Mom and Dad rushed in, their faces etched with worry.

“Tyler, are you hurt? What happened?” Mom’s voice was a frantic tremor.

Tyler was sitting on the couch, unharmed, but reveling in the attention. “I’m fine. You don’t have to worry.” His smug grin, a mischievous spark in his eyes, was almost maddening. Tyler's loving the attention.

“Your son is fine, thanks for asking,” I said, my voice edged with exasperation, and I'm being ignored by my parents, who are more concerned about Tyler. Which is fine with me. I am still a little mad at him for charging Justin.

Mom glanced at me, a wave of relief washing over her face. “I knew you could protect yourself and Tyler. I’m so proud of you!”

My gaze shifted to Nick, who was standing a little way back, his eyes glued to the floor. He had been through a lot tonight. He was a good man, a good brother, but he needed a haven.

“So what happened? Out there?” I asked Mom, my voice laced with a grim determination.

Before she could answer, she sniffed the air, a frown creasing her brow. “What’s that smell? It’s like…something died.”

“Yeah, there’s two dead. One on the recliner and one in the kitchen,” I replied. “The one on the recliner was the longest, so he probably already crapped himself.”

A wave of nausea washed over me. I’d never been one for gore, but the sheer brutality of it, the way it had invaded our home, was terrifying. I turned to Tyler, a silent question in my eyes.

“I’m okay,” he said, his voice quiet, almost choked with emotion. “We’ll be fine. We’re safe now.”

Mom’s eyes met mine. She understood, even though I didn’t have to say it. We were a team, and we were going to get through this.

We stepped back outside and stood in the driveway, watching as six police cars sped down the street towards our house. We met with a barrage of orders to get down on the ground, but Mom and Dad, their badges flashing in the headlights, quickly calmed the situation.

My father called over the officer in charge, his voice commanding and measured. “There are two dead inside, and my son, Marty, protected his boyfriend, Tyler. It was self-defense.”

He turned to the officer; his face hardened. “Why did it take your police force over an hour to respond to the Walker’s residence, and the same time to reach my residence here? Where were you?”

The officer straightened, a look of defiance settling on his face. “We didn’t find the teen partner report credible, and I would appreciate it if you lowered your tone when addressing me, sir.”

My father’s smirk widened. “Go inside and tell me if the reports are creditable now. And when you come back out, you owe this young man and his brother an apology and to my son and his boyfriend. Not partner, not best friends, not domestic mates, but boyfriend.”

The officer bristled, about to retort, when a tall figure emerged from one police truck. The man, with a shock of white hair and a white mustache, stood in front of my dad, his eyes glinting with amusement. Both men smiled and shook hands.

“Theo, how is it you’ve aged, but your wife hasn’t?” He turned to Mom, his gaze lingering on her. “My, oh my, Claire, it’s been too long.”

Mom’s face softened. “It’s nice to see you again, Roger.”

He turned back to my father, his smile broadening. “It’s those damn green smoothies. Last time your Claire made them at your summer house, Chelsea here still makes them every morning.”

The tall officer chuckled. “Geez, that was back in what, ’82?”

“’87,” Mom corrected, a sly smile playing on her lips.

The tall officer turned to Tyler, Nick, and me. “Nick, Tyler,” he pointed at each of them, “I am Police Chief Roger Vera, and I hope you can accept my apologies for some of my officers here. Many of them still want to live in the homophobic era.”

He paused, then continued, his voice firm but kind. “I will see personally that the officers here go through a thorough investigation of any prior offensive, and let’s be honest, I put money on it. They have committed hateful acts by violating their Oath of Honor as a police officer. I’m bisexual, so I promise with my heart I will seek justice for their inappropriate behaviors towards any member of our beautiful community.”

Nick’s shoulders slumped, his eyes welling with tears. “Police Chief Vera, I want to say thank you for not saying just the LGBTQ+ community. I don’t know about this fine couple and how they feel about it, but it’s feeling like we live in the Jim Crow era again. Don’t we live in the United States of America? Why do we have to separate everyone again? Doesn’t the Pledge of Allegiance say, ‘One Nation’?”

Nick’s voice broke, and he apologized, saying he was simply fed up with people thinking a particular community was more important than another.

Chief Vera nodded his head. “How old are you, Nick?”

“Twenty-two, in two weeks,” Nick replied, his voice barely a whisper.

“Are you in college, Nick?” Chief Vera asked.

“Yes, sir. I’m working on my bachelor’s in public relations,” Nick answered.

Chief Vera nodded his head and pointed his finger at Nick. “If you want it, considering you must give your two weeks’ notice, I have a spot for you on our team that has your name on it. You will get an office, we will pay you a salary, give you back what you already paid for school, and I will pay for the rest of whatever it cost to complete your bachelor’s. Even if you want to get your PhD, I will pay for it. Your title will be Public Relations Officer.”

Nick fainted.

“Thank you, sir. Just one thing. Can I start tomorrow? My boss at work fired me today because of this situation. He said it will cause a negative vibe with his business if I go back.”

Chief Vera smiled, extending his hand to Nick. “Take a week off. All of this can be traumatizing. I’ll see you in your office Monday morning at 0800, officer.”

Nick awkwardly saluted. “Thank you, Chief.”

Chief Vera turned his attention to me. “Marty, you have grown! I haven’t seen you since you were three or four years old.”

“Roger, you need to get your head checked,” Mom interjected. “He was nine, and it was at his little league game.”

My father started laughing, “Remember he popped that foul ball, and it landed right in your patrol car's windshield!”

Dad was laughing so hard, he passed gas, which only made him laugh harder and snorted too.

Chief Vera smiled at me. “You always hated that car, because there wasn’t enough blue and white in the design.”

Tyler nudged my arm. “You have a thing for blue and white, don’t you?”

I blushed, nodding sheepishly.

Chief Vera looked at both Tyler and me, his eyes twinkling. “If both of your parents agree, I have two openings for Police Patrol officers. I could use sturdy men like yourselves on my force. Granted, it will be light duty until you’re both twenty-one years old, but you will go through the academy and be full-fledged officers. How does that sound, gentlemen?”

Tyler looked down; his brow furrowed with concern. “That will be an issue because my parents are no longer in my life. I live with Nick, but he’s not my legal guardian. So thank you for the opportunity, Chief, but I will wait until I’m twenty-one.”

Dad appeared behind Tyler, his hand resting on his shoulder. “Well, you have technically been living under our roof, and you have been under protected by several high-ranking officers. So, what do you say, son? Do you think you can handle the police force?”

Tyler’s gaze flickered to me, waiting to hear my answer.

My dad, with a tenderness that surprised me, said, “I was talking to you, Tyler. Do you want to become a member of the family? Before you say yes,” he called over to Mom and Nick, “Nick, how would you feel if we took you and your brother in under our roof? We have two extra bedrooms, both with bathrooms, and I can finally turn the basement into a man cave.” Dad whispered, "Now, Mom has no choice but to say yes."

Nick’s eyes welled up, and he looked at Tyler.

Chief Vera cleared his throat, a hint of amusement in his voice. “Y’all talk it out. But by the sound of it, I will see all three of y’all Monday morning. Well, two of y’all Monday after school.”

My heart pounded in my chest, a mixture of fear and hope. It seemed like our lives were about to take an extraordinary turn, a turn that promised both danger and adventure.

As I turned to face Tyler, I couldn't believe what our parents were suggesting. "They must be out of their minds if they think we'll be sleeping in separate rooms," I whispered to him. Tyler took my hand and brought it to his lips, planting a soft kiss on the back of my hand. Mom had Dad in a tight embrace, out of earshot, but she surprised us by saying, "I heard that, and yes, you will sleep in separate rooms." We couldn't help but snicker at her words. "No way, it's not happening," I replied firmly. Mom stopped in her tracks and turned to face us. "Fine, then we'll rescind our offer," she declared. Tyler and I exchanged a quick glance before simultaneously agreeing, "Fine." Mom couldn't help but laugh as she walked into the house. Suddenly, Nick popped up behind us, all smiles. "Guys, I think Mom's a robot or something," he joked. We laughed as we made our way inside. "Actually, I prefer to think of myself as Super Mom, not a robot Nick," She said with a cheery tone.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The hospital’s front door, usually a symbol of hope and healing, felt like a portal to a different reality for me. Every step resonated with the echoes of past anxieties, a visceral reminder of the fragility of life. “At least you’re not a patient here this time,” Tyler’s voice, soft and reassuring, pulled me back to the present. His hand, warm and steady in mine, offered a grounding presence amidst the sterile white walls.

The sign at the check-in desk felt almost ironic in its starkness: "Weapons of any kind are strictly prohibited." I couldn't help but chuckle, a nervous tremor escaping my lips. Tyler, ever the pragmatist, looked at me with a puzzled frown. “I don’t get why that’s funny,” he said, his confusion etched on his face. His expression, so innocent and earnest, always melted my heart.

“I don’t want to go to jail today,” I replied, my voice barely a whisper. The events of the past few days were still a raw, throbbing wound. Justin, a man who’d threatened our very existence, was supposed to be dead. Yet he’d somehow returned from the brink, leaving a trail of disbelief and fear in his wake.

Tyler’s brow furrowed. "Are you still carrying your gun?" he asked, his voice barely a murmur. "I told you; you can lock it back up. Justin’s behind bars now. You're safe."

Safe. It was a word I was struggling to believe. The memory of the knife sinking into Justin’s back, the blood staining my hands, the chilling silence in the aftermath, all felt as vivid as if it had just happened. My fear, a constant, unwelcome companion, had morphed into a palpable entity, a living presence that lurked in the shadows of my thoughts.

"No, I left it at home," I admitted. "Since you threatened me with no handholding, no kissing, no sex, no cuddles for a month, a whole month! Which, by the way, I believe the United States Supreme Court would find that threat a violation of the eighth amendment of the U.S. Constitution." I leaned in close, delivering a faint air kiss to his cheek. "Then why are you laughing?" Tyler’s confusion remained, a soft crease between his brows.

I whispered into his ear, "Because I wonder if that includes my super squirter in my trousers. Maybe I should ask them right now, just to be sure." Tyler's laughter, rich and infectious, filled the sterile space, bringing a glimmer of normalcy back into the world.

"I seriously thought you were going to flex your arms and say, ‘because of these guns,’" he said, his voice still laced with amusement. “I was going to walk away if you did that.”

"Next!" the lady at the check-in window called, her voice a jarring intrusion in our shared bubble of laughter. "Are you here for a visit or an appointment?"

"We're here to visit Stacy Williams," Tyler said, his voice firm and confident.

The woman pecked at her keyboard like a frantic bird, her eyes glued to the screen. "I'm sorry, boys, but she's gone. I'm so sorry to tell you this."

The words hit me like a physical blow. My heart plummeted, a cold, heavyweight settling in my chest. "What do you mean, she's gone? Gone where?" I demanded, my voice tinged with both hurt and anger.

“Gone, like deceased, dear,” the woman replied, her tone dripping with sympathy. “I’m sorry for your loss. If you like, I can call the nurses’ floor and see if they can talk to you about it. Would you like me to do that?”

“Is that seriously a question?” I snarled, my anger bubbling over. "I’m your rideshare home, right? I tried calling my best friend, but they're probably having sexy time."

I watched in disbelief as Tyler spun around, his eyes widening in shock. "Stacy POOH!!" he exclaimed, rushing towards the source of the voice.

There she was, standing on crutches, her face a mixture of mischievous glee and relief. "Thank you for playing along, Mrs. Wilken," Stacy said, her voice laced with amusement. “Let me know when you want me to babysit your grandson!"

I stood there, frozen in the whirlwind’s wake of emotions, a kaleidoscope of confusion, disbelief, and relief swirling within me. “You should have seen your faces!” she added, her laughter echoing through the waiting area.

I walked towards her, my heart still pounding with the lingering fear of losing another friend. "That wasn't funny, Stac," I said, my voice tight with a reprimand.

"Then why am I laughing?" she asked, a full-blown laugh escaping her lips, the sound like a wave washing away the tension that had gripped me.

We left the hospital, a new chapter unfolding before us, a tapestry woven with the threads of fear, hope, and a shared resilience. As we drove, Stacy leaned forward, her expression turning serious. "So, boys, before we head back, can we talk really quick?"

"Yeah sure, what's on your mind?" Tyler asked, his voice calm and reassuring.

"I'm not ready to talk about what happened the other night, but I was hoping to get your approval of someone." Stacy said hesitantly.

“The answer is no, Stacy," I said, my voice harsh with disapproval. "Matthew led you into a trap. You honestly want to see him as a boyfriend?”

Stacy’s eyes widened in surprise. "No, stupid," she said, her voice sharp with exasperation. "That jerk is going to prison. I was talking about Nick."

A wave of disbelief washed over me. I couldn’t believe she was considering dating him. “Nick? You know he’s….” I stopped myself, the words catching in my throat. Tyler’s eyebrows shot up to his hairline, his eyes widening in surprise. A dimple smile appeared on his face. "I approve, Stac. I was trying to get both of you interested in each other."

Stacy looked at me through the rearview mirror, her eyes searching my face. "Marty?"

I hesitated, my mind racing, trying to make sense of this sudden shift in direction. “Stacy, you just went through something no woman should go through… You shouldn’t be thinking about boys right now, especially since one just injured you. Nick is...” I struggled to find the right words. “Nick is the perfect choice! I approve too!”

The words tumbled out of my mouth before I could stop them. A spontaneous declaration of support for a relationship that felt both shocking and surprisingly fitting. Stacy and Tyler squealed with delight, their voices a joyous chorus in the confined space of the minivan.

"Oh, thank god!" Stacy exclaimed, her eyes sparkling with happiness. "Marty, you know what this means, right?"

"We are going to be roommates now?" I asked, my voice laced with a hint of apprehension.

Stacy’s grin was so wide it stretched from ear to ear. My silence must have given her the answer she needed. I looked at her, and a hesitant smile spread across my face. “Alright Nick, you can sit up now!”

A blush crept up Stacy’s neck as she turned around, her eyes searching for Nick. “Gotcha! Karma’s a bitch, isn’t it?” I declared, a smug smile spreading across my face.

“Asshole,” she replied, her voice laced with both amusement and irritation.

“I am what I eat,” I retorted, laughing.

Tyler’s cheeks flushed a rosy, pink as he snickered, his gaze fixed on the window. Stacy, in the back seat, groaned. “Gross, I didn’t need to know that! Ugh, now I need both physical and mental therapy. Thanks for that!”

The air was thick with laughter and a sense of shared relief, a reminder that even in the darkest of times, the resilience of the human spirit could prevail. And amid it all, I realized, with a surge of unexpected joy, that, just maybe, life was still holding out a hand, offering a chance at a new beginning, a new chapter in this strange and unpredictable journey called life.

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How do you feel about surprise parties Stacy? I asked Stacy.

Stacy’s laughter echoed in the van, filling the small space with warmth. “Surprise parties? They’re like a box of chocolates—sometimes you get the good ones and other times, it’s just a big, sticky mess!” She rolled her eyes playfully, but the glimmer in her eyes told another story. “But I’m all for them if they’re fun and involve cake. Lots of cake!”

“Cake is the universal language of celebration,” Tyler chimed in, chuckling. “But you know, we might have to plan something special if we're throwing you a party, especially after all the drama you've been through. It should be a proper welcome back to the world.”

I nodded, the idea taking root in my mind. “What if we threw you a surprise party after your next check-up?” I asked, excitement bubbling within me. “We could invite everyone, make it a thing. You’d walk in and Bam! Cake, friends, and zero worries for a night.”

Stacy’s face lit up like a Christmas tree, a faint blush coloring her cheeks. “Okay, now you’re making me excited, and I’m not supposed to be excited yet! Let's keep it all a surprise. Deal?"

“Deal,” Tyler and I chorused.

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The back of the van swung open, revealing Stacy’s pale face, etched with the weariness of her hospital stay. My heart ached for her, seeing her so vulnerable, but a flicker of excitement crackled in my veins. Today, we were going to pull off the impossible. Today, we were going to give Stacy the surprise party of her dreams.

“Your dad really made this ramp, huh?” Stacy’s voice was a whisper, barely audible. She looked at the wooden ramp, painstakingly built by my dad, leading from the van to the porch.

“Yeah,” I said, taking her hand, “he’s surprisingly good at that kind of stuff. Though never ask him to make you a grilled cheese sandwich.”

“Why not?” she asked, her brow furrowed in confusion.

“Let’s just say he has a unique way with cheese,” I whispered, leaning closer to her. “It’s a secret you don’t want to know.”

Suddenly, a sharp crack echoed through the house. We both turned our heads, a shared look of apprehension passing between us. It was then that I saw Tyler, his eyes wide with fear, gesturing wildly from behind the window. My stomach dropped.

“Tyler, take Stacy behind the house,” I urged. “Hug the side of it.”

“I know, I know, it’s brick,” he said, his voice cracking.

Tyler guided Stacy down the ramp and toward the back of the house. I watched them go, then dashed into the house. My dad stood in the middle of the living room, staring at a shattered vase on the floor. My mom’s face was a mask of fury.

“I just FIXED that vase!” she shrieked, her voice ringing with indignation.

I didn’t hesitate. “No time! She’s wobbling to the back with Tyler!” I blurted; my voice frantic. We sprinted to the back of the house, my heart pounding in my chest.

Just as Stacy rounded the corner, I flipped on the party lights. Fifty faces erupted into a joyous cacophony of "Surprise!" The scene was a whirlwind of color and sound, confetti raining down like a confetti storm.

Stacy's eyes widened, her mouth forming a perfect “O.” For a moment, she looked like a child, awestruck and overwhelmed. But then a wave of emotion washed over her face, tears welling in her eyes. She was crying. It wasn’t just happiness, though, there was something else there, something deeper.

As her parents emerged from the crowd, her face froze, her expression one of disbelief. It was as if the reality of the party, the joy, the love, was too much to bear. She looked like a little girl, lost, and frightened, searching for comfort in her mother's arms.

Tyler, sensing the shift in the atmosphere, pulled me aside. “I need to tell you something,” he whispered, his voice heavy with unease. “Something important.”

I felt a chill run down my spine. What was he about to tell me? What might threaten the fragile joy of this moment?

The air crackled with unspoken tension. Tyler's question hung heavy between us, a question born not from desire, but from the depths of his fear. I knew where this was going. We looked around, making sure no one was paying attention to us. Stacy was the center of everyone's attention, her laughter echoing through the room — perfect.

I took Tyler's hand, our fingers intertwining like branches of a tree, and we climbed the stairs. The familiar creaking of the old wooden steps, the soft glow of the landing light – all of it felt different now, charged with a silent urgency.

"You okay, Ty?" I asked, pulling him gently into my room. His eyes were shadowed, his shoulders tense. He reached for me, his hand finding its way to my waist, drawing me close. I kissed the tip of his nose, his warm scent a balm to my worries.

"Babe, talk to me," I urged, my voice laced with concern. "What's wrong?"

He didn't meet my gaze, his voice a hushed whisper, "What broke inside when we were about to come in?"

"Dad broke the same vase I broke from the other night," I explained, my heart sinking. "He said he tripped."

His hand tightened around my waist. He pulled out the handgun from his ankle holster, a cold steel weight in his palm. He ejected the magazine, clearing the chamber. "I got scared this morning before we left," he said, his voice barely audible. "Knowing Justin was still in the hospital, and I know I told you to leave it home, and your comment earlier about the threat I made..." He trailed off, his gaze flicking away from mine.

I pressed my finger against his lips, silencing him. I looked into his eyes, a kaleidoscope of fear, longing, and the raw vulnerability that stole my breath away. "I know you're scared, Ty," I said, my voice gentle, "and so am I. But I'm scared for a different reason. I'm scared you'll want to leave because of the fear, and I'm scared to lose you."

His eyes met mine, the fear slowly receding, replaced by a flicker of something else — hope. "I’ve wanted to talk to you about Chief Vera's offer," I continued, my voice trembling slightly. "Before me, you stayed in a shadow, safe. You hate violence because of what happened, but now you're..."

He kissed me, a tender, desperate kiss that spoke volumes.

"I love you, Marty," he whispered against my lips, his voice thick with emotion. "I may have been safe in a shadow, but I was living in fear, constantly looking over my shoulder. Look at me now, carrying a gun, me. I feared guns before you. You’re scared to lose me because of fear, but I'm scared to lose you because I don't want you to wake up one day bored and tired of me being so useless."

He stood, walking to the dresser, his back straight. He put the gun back in the safe. The silence after his words felt heavy, like the weight of a decision about to be made. He turned back to me, his eyes holding mine.

"I want to take Chief Vera's offer," he said, his voice steady. "I want to be part of the change, for people like me, those who call for help but get pushed to the back burner because of some homophobic cop thinking we don’t matter. I want to change that, and I want you by my side. I don't want to do this alone. I'm tired of being alone and being dismissed. Will you, Marty?"

I rose to my feet, wrapping my arms around him. "Babe, Ty, Tyler, you are never alone with me around. I will never let you think you’ll ever be alone. So yes, I will do the police academy with you. We will train together, fight together, and save as many people as we can, together."

He pulled away from me, his gaze dropping to his untied shoelace. He kneeled, his fingers deftly weaving the laces back together. I watched, my gaze tracing the outline of his back, the way his shirt pulled up, revealing a sliver of skin just above his butt. It sent a shiver down my spine, a delicious mix of excitement and anticipation.

"Ahem," he cleared his throat, his voice laced with amusement. "Eyes up here, Bear."

I lifted my gaze, meeting his eyes, my heart pounding in my chest. "I meant," he said, his voice soft, "Will you marry me, Marty?"

The world seemed to tilt on its axis, the room spinning around me. Words failed me, my brain short-circuiting. My mouth fell open, my eyes widened in disbelief. I stumbled backward, my weight falling onto the edge of the bed. He rushed to me, his hands gently catching me before I could fall.

"Yes!" I exclaimed, my voice shaky with a mixture of joy and shock. He grinned, his eyes sparkling with happiness. He took my hand, slipping a silicone wedding band onto my finger.

"Can I be honest with you, Babe?" I asked, a nervous laugh escaping my lips.

"Of course," he chuckled. "I think that's part of the whole ring thing agreement."

I walked to my closet, pulling out a large box, carefully placing it on the bed. "Open it," I said, taking a step back to give him space.

He cut open the box, revealing a smaller box within. He lifted the lid, his eyes widening as he saw the contents. He pulled out a Stetson, a red and white Western shirt, a pair of slim-fit jeans, a belt with a buckle that showed two interlinked horseshoes with our initials, and a pair of Ariat boots. He carefully examined each item, his expression a mix of surprise and delight. Then he undressed, right there in front of me, and donned the new clothes. He looked better than perfect, his smile radiating joy and gratitude.

"Ty," I said, "there's more in the box."

He looked inside, his brow furrowed. "Marty, are you serious?"

He pulled out the last box, a smaller, more discreet one. He unlocked it, revealing a sleek, custom nine-millimeter pistol with a custom grip that said on one side, "Marty's Heart" and on the other, "Forever and Always." As he was placing the pistol back in the box, he noticed the final item–a card that simply said, "Will you marry me, Tyler?"

He turned to me, his eyes searching mine. I was on my knee, a nervous laugh bubbling up in my throat. "Well, this is awkward huh," I said.

He smiled, a genuine, heart-warming smile. "Yes," he said, his voice a low rumble. "Yes, I will marry you."

He kissed me, his lips moving against mine with a newfound strength and conviction. "We should probably keep this a secret for tonight, right?" he said, pulling away. "It's supposed to be Stacy's party."

"We think alike, don't we?" I laughed, fixing his Stetson. We headed downstairs, our hands intertwined.

Stacy was the first to notice. Her jaw dropped, her eyes widening in disbelief. Nick followed suit, his mouth agape. "Yo, cowboys, no tent rocking tonight," he said, his voice laced with teasing. Tyler flipped him the bird and laughed.

Then, it hit me. His outfit. Mom and Dad were coming over, their faces radiating a mixture of relief and joy. Of course, they ignored me and took Tyler away, leaving me to mingle with Stacy's side of the party.

"Thank you so much for everything, Marty," Stacy said, her eyes shining. "I knew I chose the right bestie from the beginning."

"You know you wanted me and my looks," I winked, blowing her a kiss. Nick popped up next to Stacy. "Yo man, stay away from the girl. You already have my brother. You can't steal my girl, too."

Nick's eyes went wide as he slowly turned to Stacy, his face flushing crimson. "I mean, I will," he stammered.

Stacy smiled, a warm, genuine smile that lit up her face. "Yes, Nick, I will be your girl," she said, leaning in and kissing him. He grinned, his face glowing with happiness. I saw the look in his eyes, the unmistakable glint of a first love.

"Nick, was Stacy the first girl you ever kissed?" I asked, my curiosity piqued.

He blushed, nodding his head. Stacy lifted his chin, her eyes full of warmth. "You're my first too," she said softly.

Nick's eyes widened, his voice a mixture of disbelief and wonder. "Really?"

Stacy nodded, a soft smile playing on her lips.

Tyler came back around, his expression a mix of relief and confusion. "Babe, I forgot they helped me box everything together," he said, his voice low. "I didn't realize it until I saw them heading directly to you. Was it bad? Do I need to go talk to them?"

His confused expression made my heart ache. I understood. He was still adjusting to this new, supportive family, a family he'd never had before.

"They told me," Tyler said, my voice soft, "They love me. They love you with me, and..." He was sniffling, his eyes welling up. "They asked me to call them Mom and Dad."

I knew they would. I had known it in my heart.

He handed me one of the two small envelopes he was holding. "They, they… I never really knew what it is like to have parents, like parents who cared. All my parents ever did was make sure I had food and only bare necessities. Mine never asked me how my day was, nor showed interest in anything I did or said, but your parents, I mean our parents, treat me and my brother as their own. They also said for us to go behind the garage…"

His voice trailed off, his emotions spilling over. The moment was heavy, charged with a raw vulnerability that made my heart swell with love and protectiveness. He needed me, now more than ever, and I was here for him, for us.

I took the envelope, my fingers brushing against his. He looked at me, his eyes holding mine, and I knew, in that moment, that this was only the beginning of our journey, a journey filled with challenges, yes, but also with love, hope, and the unwavering belief that together, we could make a difference in the world. We would face whatever came our way, side by side, hand in hand, our hearts beating in unison, a symphony of love that would echo through the years.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The weight of the envelope pressed against my palm, a tangible symbol of the strange, unexpected turn our lives had taken. It felt like an artifact from another dimension, a portal to a future I hadn't even dared to dream of. "What is this?" Nick’s voice, sharp with excitement, cut through the night air.

"I don't know," Tyler murmured, his eyes wide with a mixture of awe and apprehension. "But they told me to bring you out here."

He spoke of "they," my parents, the enigmatic figures who, despite their constant presence, always seemed shrouded in a veil of mystery. I was used to their sudden bursts of unconventional gestures, their unfathomable generosity, their unwavering, but often silent, love.

We left the back patio, our steps hesitant, our hearts pounding in anticipation of the unknown. The garage, usually a repository of mundane tools and forgotten memories, suddenly felt charged with a potent energy.

I reached for the doorknob, but Tyler stopped me, his voice barely a whisper. "They said… go around to the back."

We followed his instructions, Nick leading the way, his normally boisterous demeanor muted, his eyes wide with curiosity. Then the words tumbled from his lips, shattering the fragile peace of the night.

"Oh my God, DUDEEE! No Fucking Way!"

He sprinted towards the darkness, his laughter echoing in the stillness. Tyler and I exchanged confused glances, our steps quickening as we followed him. And then, I saw it. Two gleaming, brand new Jeep Cherokees, one emerald green, the other a deep cherry red, stood side-by-side. A shimmering Yamaha YZF-R7 motorcycle, its chrome gleaming under the moonlight, completed the tableau.

The reality of the scene crashed over Tyler like a tidal wave. He gasped, his eyes wide and unfocused, his chest heaving as he fought for breath. Fear, pure and unadulterated, coiled in his stomach. He crumpled to the ground, his hands clutching his chest, his body racked with silent sobs.

I rushed to his side, pulling him close, my heart pounding in sync with his. "Babe, relax. Breathe with me. Deep, long breaths," I whispered, my voice firm yet soothing.

He clung to me, his body trembling, his breathing ragged. Slowly, the tremors subsided, the air returning to his lungs; the color returning to his face. He met my eyes, his gaze filled with a mix of gratitude and bewilderment. He handed me the envelope, his name scrawled across the front in my mother's familiar, elegant script, and then, without a word, disappeared into the shadows.

Nick saw him go and, grabbing my arm, whispered, "Marty, let him be, please."

I watched him go, a silent promise of support in my heart. Turning back to the garage, I felt the frigid air bite into my skin, a stark contrast to the warmth of my engagement ring, the weight of the envelope pressing against my palm.

“Where are the others?” My mother’s voice, laced with concern, startled me back to the present.

I sat down, the plush sofa offering a momentary refuge from the swirling emotions within. "They, umm," I stammered, searching for words that could capture the whirlwind of events. "I think it was… an overload. I'm not feeling well. When you see Tyler, tell him I'm feeling sick. Maybe he should sleep in his room tonight."

My mother’s gaze, usually so sharp and inquisitive, softened, her voice filled with concern. "Marty, did something happen out there?"

I met her eyes, choosing my words carefully. "No, just… I think Tyler just needs some alone time. Thank you for the bike. It’s amazing."

I rose to my feet, my legs shaky, my head spinning.

"Marty? Are you sure you're okay?" Her voice followed me down the hallway.

I turned back, forcing a smile. "Yeah, just tired, Mom. Love you. Good night."

I closed the door, the sound of her footsteps receding, a familiar melody of unspoken anxieties.

As I stepped into my room, the sudden silence felt deafening. I kicked off my boots, leaving my jeans on, my shirt falling onto the floor with a dull thud. I crawled into bed, drawing the covers over my body, seeking the comfort of darkness and silence.

Tyler, my love, was overwhelmed. The sudden influx of love, the overwhelming generosity, the realization that our journey had just taken a radical, unexpected turn. He needed time to process it all. He just needed time.

My eyes closed, a single question echoing in the quiet of the night. What is this?

The answer, elusive as it seemed, whispered itself as a silent prayer. This is not a dream. This is our life, and we are ready to face it together.

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The clock on the nightstand blinked 3:15, its green numerals mocking me. I reached across the bed, my hand instinctively seeking the warmth of Tyler’s body. Empty. My heart stuttered, a cold dread replacing the comforting weight I’d expected. I drew back the sheets, my legs already numb from the chill and stepped onto the floorboards. They creaked in protest as I shuffled toward the door, the knob groaning as I turned it. A whisper of sound, a squeak that echoed through the silent house, swallowed by the darkness.

A piece of paper fluttered to the floor, catching the faint moonlight. I snatched it up, my fingers trembling as I unfolded it. Scrawled across the page in his familiar, messy handwriting were words that should have brought comfort but ignited a firestorm in my chest. “Please don’t lock me out of our room again. I don’t care if you’re contagious or mad at me. Please don’t make me feel like this again. I love you.”

The note was a lifeline, a desperate plea for connection, yet it only intensified the gnawing fear that clawed at my insides. I laid the paper on the desk, the weight of his words pressing down on me, and slumped into the chair. My head hung low, the world spinning around me, a dizzying vortex of worry.

The air felt thick, heavy, suffocating. I had to find him. My feet carried me down the hallway, each step echoing in the stillness. The door to his room, the one mom wanted him to sleep in after the attack of Justin, was open, the bed untouched, just like he’d left it. A surge of panic seized me, a tightening in my chest that threatened to suffocate me. He wouldn’t sleep on the couch, not in that big empty room. The thought of him alone, vulnerable, sent a wave of terror crashing over me.

I stumbled down the stairs, my feet numb, my vision blurry. The house was a tomb, the only light a sliver of moonlight slicing through the living room window. My eyes scanned the sofa, my heart pounding in my ears, my breath coming in ragged gasps. The silence was deafening, punctuated only by the frantic beat of my heart.

Panic, like a wild beast, took hold. I had to find him. I had to know he was safe. I ran to the top of the stairs, my legs feeling like jelly, my head spinning. I saw Nick’s room, the door slightly ajar. I spun around, my mind racing, my hands shaking, my breath catching in my throat.

Nick was asleep, snoring softly in the darkness. My heart hammered against my ribs, a frantic drumbeat against the silence of the house. I was alone. Tyler was gone. Panic clawed at my throat. He shouldn't be out there alone. Not after what happened.

I scrambled back down the stairs, my bare feet padding silently on the wooden steps. Then, I saw him. He was sitting on the floor, nestled against the wall where I had told him to hide, when Justin attacked. His head hung low; his shoulders slumped. He looked so small, so vulnerable, curled in on himself like a wounded animal.

I moved towards him, my steps slow and deliberate. The sight of him sitting there, alone in the dark, sent a wave of icy dread through me. I slid down the wall, the cold brick pressing against my back, until I was sitting right next to him. I reached out, hesitantly at first, then with a desperate hope, and laid my hand on his arm. He didn't stir.

When I got to his level, I saw he was asleep. Asleep in an upright fetal position, his head resting on his knees. A sob escaped my lips. Relief mingled with a heart-wrenching pang of sorrow.

I wrapped my arm around him, pulling him towards me so that he could slouch against my shoulder. He startled from sleep, his eyes blinking in the dimness.

“Hey, you,” I whispered, my voice barely a breath. He looked at me, his eyes filled with a sadness that mirrored the emptiness I felt within.

"Do you want me to carry you to bed?" I asked softly, hoping to coax him back to the warmth of our shared space.

He shook his head, his eyes closed as if to shut out the world. "I'm sorry, Marty," he said, his voice thick with emotion.

"Don't be," I whispered, brushing my hand through his hair, trying to soothe the turmoil in his heart. "I know they can be a little too much. I didn't know they were going to do any of that. If I had, I would have told them to back off, but I didn't know."

I rested my head on top of his, trying to offer him the solace he so desperately needed.

"It wasn't your parents, Marty," he said, his voice so low I could barely hear it. "It was mine."

My brow furrowed in confusion. "I don't understand, babe. They weren't there."

He looked down, a grimness settled on his face, a darkness that made my heart clench in my chest. "Exactly," he murmured. "Please don't hate me for saying this. And please, don't love me any less. I'm still struggling with it. I promise you I love you. Don't judge me, okay?"

His voice trembled, his words breaking apart with quiet desperation.

I wanted to reach out and hold him tighter, to take away his pain. But I knew I couldn't. This was something he had to face alone.

"Tyler," I said, my voice firm, "I would never judge you. You damn well know that. I will never."

I tried to force myself not to lean in and kiss him, to offer him the comfort of physical touch. But I knew, deep down, that I couldn't. Not now. Not until he felt safe enough to let me in.

"The incident at the park where Justin and his friends attacked me changed everything. I rushed to the hospital, but you already know that. When my parents arrived, devastated to learn about the hateful words Justin had carved into my skin with a knife: 'Faggot'. From that point on, they never returned. They packed up our home and left. Amid the chaos, my brother Nick stood up to our father in the living room, while my mother frantically packed boxes into the moving truck. Nick refused to leave me alone, even if it meant fighting our own father. We were a team, and he fiercely protected me. My parents disowned both of us- me for being gay, and Nick for standing by my side. The house paid was for, so my mother urged Nick to keep it. But that was the last we saw of them." Tyler's eyes closed tightly as he sniffled, replaying the painful memory in his mind.

"When I got out, I couldn't believe it," Tyler fell silent. "I went into my room and cried myself to sleep. Parents aren't supposed to do that to their children, not when the children need them the most. I wanted my mother to hold me and tell me everything was going to be all right. I went into their empty room and fell asleep where my mother's side of the bed would have been, and I would picture her telling me she was sorry." My eyes started getting watery, and I squeezed Tyler hard into me.

" I couldn't take it anymore," Tyler whispered with thick sobbing smack from his lips as he was trying not to cry, I can see his chin quivering, "I called her on her cell phone using the prepaid phone Nick got me for emergencies." Tyler stopped and looked up at the ceiling, and it came out, "She answered the phone with my dad in the background with music in the background like how she would when she was cleaning the house, singing dancing with the vacuum cleaner. I told her I wish she were home because I needed her. She asked me who was this, and was this some kind of sick joker? I told her it was me, and she scoffed and told me she didn't have any children anymore, that both were dead to her, then she hung up on me. I tried to kill myself that night, but I couldn't. Nick found me and he decided we needed to move. A fresh start. Her words haunt me, and it wasn't the last time I wanted to. Our first day was also her birthday. I had called her before I started walking to school, hoping she would reconsider, she had gone back to the old house and couldn't find us. Just maybe, she was waiting by the phone every day for me to call, to ask me how we are, where we are. My father answered and told me they don't want a faggot and a faggot protector in their lives, in their family, and to stop calling before he comes and finds us to kill us. I told him he doesn't have to because I planned on doing it that night."

Tyler finally looks at me, and his eyes so red and swollen, cheeks wet, and he wipes his face in the sleeve of his shirt, and says, “I was going to do it, I planned on doing it, but you with the map in your hand, your smile, your kind eyes, you made my heart beat again, I wish every day that I wasn't so broken and fearful when I first saw you. I was afraid if you got to know me and found out I was a faggot you wouldn't even look at me twice. I went home that day, speed walking to the house, and went in my room and begged for God to help me end it all, to forgive me for what I was going to do. I had the sleeping pills in my hand, but every time I closed my eyes, so I didn't have to see the pills emptying in my mouth, all I pictured was you standing in the hall asking me 'if I knew where room 206 was.”

I couldn't believe what I was hearing from Tyler. The words weren't processing fast enough, and my face was not making my silence look good. I had one question for him, and I was hesitating to ask it. He looked at me and said, "I should’ve told you sooner, but I'll understand if you feel like we are done. I can tell Nick that I told you the truth and we need time apart." He stood up and walked slowly to the stairs. "Tyler." I ran to him, embraced him, and told him he wasn't going anywhere but to our room. He tiptoed back to our room, and I shut the door.

We cried so much that we didn't talk. I crawled into bed first, lifted the sheets so Tyler could slip in, and threw them over the both of us. I wrapped my arm around him and nestled in closer. I kissed his shoulder and whispered, "I'm truly, madly, deeply in love with you." I felt his body relax, and we both fell asleep.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“Good morning, babe!” I chirped, stretching and yawning. Empty bed. Sigh. Tyler was already gone. This was becoming a regular thing, like a game of hide-and-seek, only I was the only one playing. Slipping out of bed, I felt the familiar chill of the hardwood floor. Tyler's slippers were missing, too. I knew where to find him–a trail of scattered, discarded slippers usually led me straight to the kitchen.

“Nick, darling,” Stacy's melodic laughter tinkled through the house, “I thought you’d be a better cook than Mr. Villarreal!”

Mr. Villarreal? Did she mean me? That’s what she called me? I love her! I’m not sure how to explain it, but I’m a bit of a… \*chef’s kiss\*.

“I never used a gas stove before, sweetie!” Nick’s voice laced with frustration.

I descended the stairs, scratching my chest, the morning air still cool against my skin. I was a man who enjoyed the finer things in life, especially a good morning coffee and a warm body next to me, so I rarely strayed from the cozy confines of our bedroom.

“Whoa man, no wonder my brother likes you! I didn’t realize you were so…” Nick trailed off, looking at Stacy with a sheepish grin, “I promise I’m not gay… hot!”

“For a newly found gay man, Marty,” Stacy chimed in, “you know how to change them. Do me a favor and leave this one's head alone for me, please. I like him.”

I chuckled, shaking my head. “He’s not my type, Stacy. And you know that.”

Nick, with a dramatic flourish, threw his hands up in the air. “What the hell are you talking about, Marty? I’m everyone's type!”

Then he turned to Stacy. “And you, Missy, I'm not gay. Keep it up, and I might have to join them next time.” He paused, as if realizing the magnitude of his statement. “That sounded better in my head... wait, no. Great. Now I see it happened, ewe, no!"

Stacy erupted into laughter, pointing at him. "At least you’re cute!"

My eyes scanned the kitchen, but Tyler was nowhere to be seen. "Nick, where’s your brother?"

“He’s probably in his jeep.” Nick focused his attention on the eggs sizzling in the pan.

“I’m sure he is,” I said, walking over to Stacy and giving her a hug. She was stuck on the couch with her broken leg. She brushed my arm, her smile warm and inviting. “Please, don't turn Nick gay.” She giggled.

I laughed, “I told you, he's not my type. And besides, my type is currently missing in action.”

Stacy raised my hand to her face and kissed the back of it. Her expression shifted, and I felt a familiar tightness in my chest.

“The Ring!” I said to myself.

Stacy's face fell, and she looked at me, hurt, like I wanted to keep this a secret from her? Well, I did, but it wasn't the best time.

“When were you going to tell me?” her voice was a low growl.

Stacy’s gaze shifted to Nick. “Nickolas James Walker! Did you know about this?” She pointed to the ring. Her eyes widened as if a connection was made. “Last night! You all came back looking like matching cowboys. You all… this means I have SO MUCH planning to do! Where do you want it? How many guests do you want? If we don’t have enough friends, I'm sure I can buy some online to attend. Music, Nick can handle that. Dancing... we need dancing lessons because you can’t waltz, and you two need to waltz!”

“Stacy,” I said, gently interrupting her whirlwind of wedding planning, “it will not happen soon. We have a lot to do before we can even think about planning. Right now, I need to find my man. May I have my hand back now?”

She let go, a mischievous grin spreading across her face. “He’s outside. He told me to tell you when you came down.”

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The sun, a molten orb in the cerulean sky, bathed the garage in a warm, golden light. It amplified the vibrancy of the two Jeeps, their metallic hues almost incandescent. Tyler, a beacon of youthful energy, was ensconced in the cherry red behemoth, like a child in a candy store. The intricate dials and levers captivated him, the very essence of the machine seeming to intrigue him. When he saw me, a smile bloomed on his face, as bright and welcoming as the sun itself.

"Hey, You," he called out, his voice laced with pure joy.

I smiled back, my heart overflowing with warmth. He jumped out of the Jeep, leaning against the driver's side door, his arms outstretched in a welcoming gesture. He approached me, his steps light and purposeful.

"Do you want to go to the beach today?" he asked, his eyes reflecting the boundless optimism of the day.

My gaze dropped to the ground, a smirk playing on my lips. "Do you think you can handle showing this off to the people at the beach?" I asked, my hand resting on my chest, a playful challenge dancing in my eyes.

He sighed; amusement etched across his face. "How about we take a ride on your bike so I can hold on tight to you?"

I kissed him, a silent affirmation of the unspoken feelings between us. "I don't want you on it without a helmet, Ty," I insisted, my voice tinged with concern.

He ran to his Jeep, emerging with two helmets in hand. One red, one blue, a tangible symbol of the vibrant duality that existed within our relationship.

"Okay, let me get changed, and you decide where you want to go. Deal?" I asked, my eyes sparkling with anticipation.

"Deal, but I want to talk to you first," he replied, his voice suddenly serious.

"Does this talk involve sexy time? I asked, a playful glint in my eyes.

"It could," he said, his gaze turning towards the back of the Jeep. "But there's tall enough fencing we can do that out here right now, you know, bless the back of the jeep."

A laugh escaped my lips. "I love your thinking, Ty, and I love you."

We moved towards the back of the Jeep, the hatch opening with a familiar metallic groan. He shed his shirt, a silent invitation to intimacy. I lifted him onto the back lip, his muscular frame a comforting weight against my own. I kissed him, trailing my lips down his neck, to his stomach, a sensual journey that culminated in the loosening of his pants.

The events of the previous night were a fresh memory, the yearning still potent within me. I craved to savor him, to revel in his presence. I wanted to touch every inch of him, to know him in every way.

He pulled off my pants, but I stopped him, pressing a kiss to his lips. "Tonight, Ty," I whispered, "Tonight you can have me. Today is all about you."

He looked at me, his eyes filled with an unspoken understanding, a mutual reverence for the beauty and complexity of our connection. The air, charged with unspoken desires, seemed to shimmer with a strange, ethereal light.

Suddenly, a shift in the air, a ripple in the fabric of reality. The familiar world around us began to warp and distort. The landscape, once mundane and familiar, transformed into a kaleidoscope of swirling colors and shifting forms.

Our bodies, caught in the vortex of this unforeseen shift, shimmered, our physical forms dissolving into a luminous haze.

We were no longer simply Tyler and me, but something more, something beyond the confines of our earthly existence. We were merging, becoming one with the swirling energies of the universe, our individual identities dissolving into a unified consciousness.

As the world blurred into a cosmic tapestry, a single, potent thought resonated within the depths of our being. This was not simply a change in our physical surroundings, but a transformation of our very essence, a step into the infinite expanse of the unknown.

We were no longer bound by the limitations of space and time. We were free.

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The air hung thick with the scent of lavender and sweat, a peculiar combination that echoed the chaotic state of my emotions. Tyler, my Tyler, stood before me, his motorcycle helmet perched awkwardly on his head, a hero frozen in a pose of misplaced bravado. "Teach me of the ancient ways, old wise one!" he declared, his voice a playful taunt. I couldn't help but laugh, a sound that erupted from my chest like a startled bird, a laugh that tumbled me backwards onto the bed. It wasn't just the helmet, but the whole absurd tableau - the bathroom door swinging open, revealing him in his post-shower glory, a towel wrapped around his waist, and then, the grand superhero stance with hands on hips. I loved him, I thought, this silly, beautiful mess of a man who could turn the most mundane moment into a comedic masterpiece.

"I don't understand why you're laughing," he said, his face a mask of genuine confusion. "I'm sure this is correct."

I pushed myself up, the laughter fading into a soft chuckle. My hand reached out, gently removing the helmet, and pulling him back to the bed. He settled between my legs, his eyes searching mine, a glimmer of vulnerability peeking through the bravado.

"Tyler," I said, my voice soft, "I want to talk about last night. I know I might ruin the moment, but we need to talk, okay?"

He nodded; his gaze locked on mine. I spoke, the words tumbling out in a rush, "Thank you for opening up to me about your thoughts. I promise, I don't, I won't, I can't judge you." My fingers lifted his shirt, and I kissed his stomach, a tender gesture of comfort. "But I need to know, why did you run away? Why did you leave me like that?"

His eyes, usually alight with mischief, filled with a deep sorrow. "I'm sorry, I just ran away. I was having a hard time processing everything, and I was terrified." His voice trailed off, barely a whisper.

I reached out, my fingers tracing the line of his jaw, a silent reassurance. "I know the parents can suffocate sometimes, but they mean well, I promise. But what were you terrified of, Tyler?"

He ran his hand through my hair, a soothing gesture that calmed the storm brewing within me. "I'm terrified that one day, I'm going to wake up and all of this isn't real. I took the handful of pills, and this is my heaven, or I’m in a coma right now, and this is all in my head. I mean, look at us." His voice cracked, the fear tangible. His words hit me like a punch in the gut, the realization that his pain was so deep, so real, and so terrifyingly close to the surface.

I lifted his shirt again, this time planting kisses along his waistband, a playful distraction to ease the tension. He chuckled, a small sound of relief, but his eyes still held a flicker of fear.

"If someone had told me the first day I saw you that you would change my life, I would have told them they were crazy," he said, his voice soft.

His gaze met mine, his hand reaching out to cup my face. "I want you to understand. I am so grateful you saved my life, the first time, unintentionally, and the second time, intentionally. I wouldn't be here, I wouldn't be able to do this, if you hadn't." His fingers brushed my cheek, sending shivers down my spine.

He pulled my shirt off, his touch gentle, his eyes devouring me. I responded, my hands finding purchase on his back, my fingers threading through his hair. A primal need surged within me, a desperate desire to prove to him, to prove to myself, that this was real. I unbuckled his pants, pulling them down, and then, my own, leaving us both naked, vulnerable, exposed.

"Get on the bed, belly up, Ty," I whispered, my voice low and commanding. He obeyed, his gaze fixed on mine, a question in his eyes.

I settled between his legs, the warmth of his body radiating against mine. My hand found its way to his base, feeling the familiar rise and fall of his breath, the unmistakable tension in his muscles. My fingers traced circles around his sac, a slow, deliberate dance that coaxed him to rise. His shaft, a magnificent eight inches, throbbed with life, a testament to the power of our connection. My tongue found its way to the head, teasing, coaxing, arousing.

He moved, his hips rocking back and forth, but I stopped him, my hands clamping down on his hips. "Don't move," I demanded, my voice low, my eyes burning into his. "Not a muscle."

He looked at me, a hint of defiance in his eyes. "You're getting rough, don't you think?"

"I said, don't move. Talking counts as moving. Last warning." I growled, my words a low rumble that vibrated through the room. I pressed my lips against his V-line, a subtle pressure that sent a jolt of pleasure through him.

He reached out, his hand tracing the line of my jaw, his touch gentle. "Tsk, tsk, tsk," I reprimanded, my hand grabbing his wrist, pinning it above his head. My hips ground against him, a deliberate, rhythmic motion that sent waves of pleasure through both of us. I leaned forward, my teeth sinking into his neck. "Do you trust me, Ty?"

His eyes met mine, a flicker of uncertainty in their depths. "This is real, Ty," I whispered, my voice a tremor in the quiet room. "This is us. This is what I want. Tell me you trust me." My hand slid down his torso, finding purchase on his cock, my fingers tightening around it.

A wave of realization washed over his face, his eyes widening with understanding. "I trust you, Marty," he said, his voice a soft rasp. "And I want to be inside you."

The look in his eyes, the raw desire, the vulnerability, it sent a wave of longing through me. I retrieved the lube from the headboard, squeezing a generous amount onto his cock. It left a thick, glistening layer, a testament to the heat building between us. I straddled him, my legs framing his hips, my hands still holding his wrists above his head. I kissed him, a passionate, hungry kiss that ignited the fire within us.

"Give me everything, Ty," I whispered, my voice thick with desire. "I want it all. I want you to leave your seed in me. I want you in me forever. Please."

The words tumbled out, raw and honest, a reflection of the deep, abiding love I felt for him. He understood. He leaned into the kiss, his tongue meeting mine, a dance of passion and longing. He thrust into me, his movements strong and powerful, his eyes filled with a love that mirrored my own.

His touch, his scent, the rhythm of his body moving within mine, it all felt so real, so right. It was a beautiful symphony of flesh and emotion, a testament to the incredible power of love and the fragility of life. We were two souls, intertwined, locked in a dance of passion and vulnerability, a testament to the beauty and the fragility of being alive.

His seed erupted within me, a powerful, primal release that echoed the depth of our connection. We lay together, our bodies intertwined, our breaths ragged, our hearts beating in unison. He looked at me, his eyes filled with a love that touched the depths of my soul.

"Marty," he whispered, his voice husky with love. "You're my first true love, my first real dream, and my first real time. And I'm so happy with you. I love you so much."

His words were a balm to my soul, confirmation that this was real, that we were meant to be.

"Tyler Walker," I said, my voice thick with emotion, "you are mine forever. I don't want anyone else. You and I, we're not a dream. We are real. And you, Tyler Walker, are my promise."

EPILOGUE

The sun beat down on the bleachers, the heat a tangible symbol of the nervous energy bubbling within me. My eyes darted across the crowd, searching for my family. "Nick, do you see them anywhere? I can't see because of the light, and this stupid hat isn't like my Stetson," I whispered, my voice strained with a mixture of anxiety and excitement.

"I think they are in the second section, four rows up. Yes, they're there! I see Stacy and Mom waving their pompons, and Dad looks embarrassed!" Nick responded, his voice betraying his usual quiet demeanor. A wave of relief washed over me. Despite his anxieties about leaving the house, my father supported me. He'd even convinced my mother to buy a bright pink pompon.

I smiled, my heart swelling with a love that transcended my nervousness. I was about to wave back, but Tyler, who was standing beside me, caught my eye. He held my gaze, his expression unreadable, an echo of my father's disapproving stare when I was caught raiding the cookie jar as a child. It was a silent understanding, a recognition that despite our shared journey, the world still saw us through different lenses.

The crowd hushed as Chief Vera stepped onto the podium. He spoke with a sincerity that resonated with the graduates, a warmth that belied the power that lived within his gaze. He spoke of dedication, of service, of becoming the guardians of the community. As he spoke, a strange sensation pulsed through me. It wasn't just the heat; it was a strange tingling, like the air itself was vibrating with energy.

"Ladies and Gentlemen of the community, I want to take pride in one squad leader who stands before you," Chief Vera continued, "While every single one of these five squad leaders is excellent, one has proven to go above and beyond, taking their darkest moment and transforming it into something golden. Squad Leader Villarreal, step forward, please."

I watched as Tyler stood tall, his chin held high, his eyes reflecting the fire of a thousand suns. He was a warrior, but he was also an artist, carving his own path through the darkness. The pulsing sensation intensified, turning into a rhythmic hum that resonated with the beat of my heart. It was a call, a summons to something greater, something beyond the confines of reality.

"This young officer has changed policies for every single one of our officers," Chief Vera said. His voice rang with a new intensity, a power that radiated through the air, "He has proven himself to be a leader, a warrior, and a fighter for anyone in the community, and he has taken his Oath of Honor to serve and protect as one of our first openly gay police officers."

Suddenly, the air shimmered, and the crowd, the stadium, even the very ground beneath my feet, seemed to distort, morphing into something ethereal, almost dreamlike. The hum intensified, becoming a symphony of otherworldly music, a chorus of unseen beings.

Chief Vera turned to the graduating class, his words echoing through the transformed landscape. "Officer Villarreal, please join us on stage."

My feet moved of their own accord, taking me towards the stage. As I joined Tyler, the symphony swelled, the air buzzing with an energy so potent it felt like a physical entity, wrapping around us, embracing us.

Chief Vera continued, his words taking on an almost prophetic quality, "Officer Marty Villarreal, our second openly gay officer in our force, and the husband to Squad Leader Villarreal." He paused, his smile radiating a strange luminescence that pulsed with the symphony.

And then, as if on cue, the ground beneath our feet cracked, revealing a shimmering portal that pulsed with the same energy that surrounded us. The crowd gasped, their faces etched with a mix of awe and disbelief.

“Officer Walker, if you can please join us on stage,” Chief Vera said, his voice barely a whisper, his eyes fixed on the portal. I felt an instinctive pull, a magnetic force that drew me towards the unknown.

As he stepped towards the stairs, Nick looked like he was about to vomit, his face pale, his eyes wide with terror. Yet, in that moment, a sense of purpose washed over me. This wasn’t about graduation, this was about something larger, a calling that transcended the limitations of the human world.

“If anyone has any issues with one of our community and/or officers for loving who they want to love, please take it up with our newest Public Relations Officer on our force,” Chief Vera's voice boomed through the stadium, his words echoing through the symphony, “Gentlemen, back to your places, please.”

I stood frozen, torn between two worlds. One, the world I knew, the world of normalcy, of expectations, of fear. And the other, the world that lays beyond the portal, a world of mystery, of possibility, of boundless potential.

The music swelled, a siren song that whispered secrets of a world unknown, a world where love and acceptance reigned supreme.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I give you the graduating officers of the 25th Midway Police Academy!” Chief Vera’s voice rang out, a declaration of our journey, our future, our destiny.

The portal shimmered invitingly, beckoning me forward. I felt Tyler’s hand on mine, his touch a grounding force, a reminder of the love that had brought me here.

I looked into his eyes, and in their depths, I saw a reflection of my yearning, a shared hunger for something more, something beyond the confines of this world.

The music swelled once more, the symphony of acceptance and change, a chorus of hope and possibility. I took a step forward, leaving behind the world I knew, ready to embrace the unknown, ready to write a new chapter in the story of our lives.

# About the Author

Coming out as a gay man in a high school environment that prioritized sports and traditional activities like agriculture and band was incredibly challenging, especially since I don't fit those molds. The pressure to conform can be intense, and feeling like an outsider can be isolating.

However, my story demonstrates that being different doesn't have to define your experience. I found my own path, embracing my passion for choir and coming out to my classmates early on, highlighting my courage and self-acceptance. This experience shaped my perspective on acceptance and diversity, displaying the importance of supporting those who don't fit the dominant narrative. It's a testament to my resilience and ability to navigate a challenging environment, finding my voice and embracing who I am despite the pressure to conform.

This story is a reminder that we all have unique journeys, and coming out in a supportive environment is crucial for young people.

# Acknowledgment

Thank you so much for reading my first ever book. I know I need a lot of work to get better. I made a promise to myself that I will do better on the sequel.