

A Transgender Story

HIM
HER
ME
YOU
US

Savannah Blue

HIM

HER

ME

YOU

US

A

Transgender Story

BY:

SAVANNAH BLUE

CONTENTS

Copyright

Acknowledgments

Playlist

Author's Note

Quote

Dedication

Chapter One

HIM

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

HER

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

ME

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

YOU

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

US

Chapter Ten

Epilogue

About the Author



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Acknowledgments

Thank you first and foremost to all the readers. You are my tribe. Without you, my stories would have no audience.

Thank you to Hawkeye for proofreading this novel.

As always, I appreciate all of you.

PLAYLIST

Click [SPOTIFY](#) to listen to songs inspired by this story

“Creep” — Radiohead

“Tonight, Tonight” — Smashing Pumpkins

“Human” — Daughter

“Sweet Jane” — Cowboy Junkies

“Under the Table” — Banks

“I Alone” — Live

“Man on the Moon” — R.E.M.

“Haunting” — Halsey

“The Rebels” — The Cranberries

“Eventually” — Tame Impala

“The End of the Affair” — Ben Howard

“Dirty Boots” — Sonic Youth

“Keep on Lying” — Tame Impala

“Limo Wreck” — Soundgarden

“Tomorrow” — Daughter

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Dear Readers,

It's a sunny morning here in Las Vegas, Nevada as I type this. The air traffic moves above McCarran International Airport. And The Strip below from where I'm perched fifty-seven floors above in front of my laptop is crowded with people.

Last night, I was in Walgreen's searching for conditioner because my strands were drying out from all the chlorine in the pool since I'd been swimming so much. A woman working there recommended a brand I'd never used before.

We chatted about Bermuda. She asked me why I'd come to a hot place like Las Vegas, which is no hotter than back home, only less humid. I explained I practically live here during most of the year. And that I love how alive this city is and how people can simply do their thing here, of course, within confines of the law—often not.

The green tag on her shirt told me her name—Aria—like the hotel which looms over The Strip.

Aria asked me what I usually did while in Las Vegas. Unfortunately, partying was not my answer. I told her I write books, romance mostly, in all sub-genres, and some non-fiction. Of course, the conversation became more interesting when she told me she'd read a book of mine called *His Mistress; Her Lover*.

I'm a new indie author who's still relatively unknown, so as you can imagine I was floored she'd read my words.

Anyways, Aria had told me she *loved* the story.

“Why don't you give someone like me their own story?” she asked.

I stared at her puzzled until I realized what she was suggesting.

She'd *chosen* the name Aria...

“We're underrepresented as it is, along with being marginalized.” Aria had told me endless stories about the experiences which shaped her into who she

is today. “It would be wonderful if you’d write something for us.” She smiled.

“I don’t see why not,” I said honestly, knowing if I set out to write this story it would be *the* most important one I’ve ever written.

Nonetheless, I knew I couldn’t let Aria down.

This is River Peyton Roth’s story.

I hope you love it.

Yours truly,

Daya

xoxo

[#behuman](#) [#transgender](#) [#loveconquersall](#)

“People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did,
but people will never forget how you made them feel.”

—Maya Angelou

To all those who refuse to dim their shine.

WARNING: This novel contains strong subject matter, strong language and strong sexual content. Intended for 18+ years and above.

This is for you, Aria, the woman who helped make my tresses shiny again.

CHAPTER ONE

MIRRORS.

I *hate* mirrors.

Especially magic ones.

I've considered shattering every single one I've come across on more than a few occasions in my lifetime.

My boots hit the pavement as I move through Midtown.

The Empire State Building looms overhead. It's silvery steeple which juts out into the sky makes me realize that at one time, long ago, it used to be the tallest building in the world.

How things change...

The smell of steaming, wet concrete, the incessant honking of car horns and the impatient yelling of drivers along with the sweat that slicks my forehead reminds me it's June.

Humid. Hazy. One big, busy hotbox.

This time of year, New York City is full of ill-tempered, impatient people who simply can't think straight since the temperatures are nearing ninety degrees. At the end of the block a man and a woman argue about who gets the cab that's pulled up to the curb.

Summertime madness...

Shaking my head, I eyeball the melee.

The woman screeches. The man roars. The cab driver stays in-the-cab.

A brunette with a heavily swollen belly stands off to the side, away from the two combatants. She's clutching her purse to her hip as if she's afraid she's about to get robbed.

When I make it near the cab, I step off the curb, usher the woman inside the cab and give the yellow hood a bang before it pulls off.

The two fools just behind me are still at it. They haven't even realized the ride they've been fighting over is gone.

Chuckling, I keep walking, inhaling the fresh scent of the fallen rain in the air as it mixes with the delectable fragrance of the street meat coming from a cart at the end of the block.

More bodies. Small, big and large. Lots of chatter and laughter.

The sidewalk is crowded with humans this time of day.

The occasional man on a boosted board floats by.

I really need to get one of those...

And every now and again a big drooling, panting dog is dragging someone down the sidewalk like it's the master and the master is the canine.

My phone beeps but I debate if I want to check the messages. They could only be from one of the three B's...Barry, my boss. Benjamin, my father. Or Beatrice, my girlfriend who I haven't seen in *forever* since I've been "busy."

Yanking the phone from my pocket, I scrunch my face when I realize I have a text from each one of them.

"Fuck," I mutter, shutting it off and shoving it back into my pocket.

I keep walking.

It's just something I do in this great big metropolis when I'm having a particularly fucked day, like this one.

New York City.

"The Big Apple."

A city of five boroughs: Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens, the Bronx and Staten Island. Host of the world-famous Fashion week. And home to nearly nine million people, fabulous Broadway shows and The Met, which I often

spend endless hours in, along with Yankee Stadium.

Go Pinstripes!

I love this city as much as I love pastrami.

I'm twenty-nine years old.

Likes: caramel toffee ice cream, The Tonight Show starring Jimmy Fallon, selfless acts, Tame Impala, babka from Bread's Bakery on East 16th Street and ramen noodles. Dislikes: assholes, Blue cheese, washing dishes, nouveau films, *anything* burgundy, the taste of orange juice after I brush my teeth.

I've lived here in New York all my life and believe it or not, I've never been to the Statue of Liberty. I think that makes me a real New Yorker... *And* I get sidewalk rage, even now.

I was raised in Borough Park in Brooklyn in a family-oriented community.

I remember the summer days when my brother Adam and I would play stick ball in the street under the blazing sun. Our T-shirts stuck to our skin and our pants skinned at the knees from making contact with the pavement way too many times. And when the fire hydrants would go wild and all the kids would play in the water, a few—the non-Jewish kids—were allowed to strip down to their underwear, but never us. Ever.

The ice cream truck would roll through twice on Saturdays and three times on Sundays, and no matter how many times my mother, Abby, swore she wouldn't give us another dollar to buy more ice cream, screaming we'd have endless diarrhea, she always did.

Gosh, those were the days.

When life was simple and uncomplicated...

Abby took us to the baseball games at Yankee Stadium and the amusement parks out on Coney Island and to the movies sometimes, but always in secret. We never could speak about our adventures to Benjamin unless we wanted them to cease and desist *immediately*.

I'm from a long line of Jews, on my father's side, who immigrated to New York City back in the 17th century and made their home in the Dutch settlement called New Amsterdam on Lower Manhattan. They built a life here for themselves. Started businesses. Purchased homes. Had children.

Family was everything to my grandparents and great-grandparents. And even now to my father, his family is *everything*.

We lived in a modest three-bedroom, two-bathroom brownstone that had all the comforts inside you could ever want.

I'm a fairly simple person who only needs essentials. I'm not a shopper and I hate having more than I need. I think I own maybe three pairs of shoes—the boots I'm wearing, my running sneakers that get used daily and a pair of white patent leather loafers for when I'm forced to go out with Beatrice and her friends.

I was educated at Jewish academy, mostly. After that, I went to NYU. My parents could never understand my decision to pursue dual degrees in sociology and education. Benjamin wanted me to help him run Roth Jewelers the same way Adam had.

Yeah, my father—the Jew—owns a jewelry store in the Diamond District.

Cliché, but hey, it's the truth.

I had no interest in customer service or spending my days staring at diamonds all day no matter how beautiful and flawless they were.

A nine-to-five doesn't suit me, especially right now. In fact, anywhere I must be in close proximity with Adam Roth doesn't-fucking-suit me.

Honestly, I thought maybe one day I'd become a teacher.

But these days, I usually find myself partaking in hours-long photo shoots with goats.

I adjust the messenger bag on my shoulder and stop to slide out of the lightweight jacket I'm wearing. As I do, I lean forward and drop some coins in the coffee cup on the ground which rests next to a man who's already nodded out.

He doesn't wake.

Smiling, I lay my jacket over him. It was a gift from Abby and had probably set her back a few hundred bucks at Neiman Marcus. I never understood the need for such expensive threads. And besides, I never liked the thing anyways.

This guy could use it as a pillow or blanket, or he could sell it, fetch a few bucks for it and get himself a meal. I stand straight and examine the clean, khaki material along with the designer label on the inside of it—Hugo Boss—against the grimy, stinky clothes that cover the sleeping man.

Satisfied, I back away and set off down the street. I come to a dead stop at my reflection in the storefront window to the right of me. My chin touches my chest and my eyes focus on the dirty pavement underfoot that's littered with cigarette buds and decorated with old pink chewing gum.

Just breathe, River.

Breathe.

Fucking breathe.

I elevate my head. Flinch.

Lower it.

Lift it back up.

Flinch once more.

Sonofabitch!

A warm breeze washes over me leaving goose bumps all over my skin and the sounds around me seem as though they've gotten louder in the last five seconds.

A truck comes to a screeching halt at the stoplight. An old man hobbles past me. His walking stick taps endlessly against the pavement. A little girl who's holding a woman's hand sings a sweet melody as she skips by. Her pearly white smile and blonde curls reminds me of how happiness and youthful innocence go hand in hand. By the time adulthood rolls around, that shit is gone.

Thump.

My heartbeat goes haywire.

Thump. Thump.

It steals my breath away.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

It catapults my thoughts to some land of fuckery.

I drop my gaze to the wet pavement beneath my boots and breathe just like I'd taught myself my entire life. Then squeeze my eyes shut.

Open them up.

Flinch one-more-fucking-time.

All thoughts of spending the night in jail assault me when I consider putting my boot right through that glass ahead. It's the only thing that stops me from committing vandalism most of the time.

The corner of my left eye twitches uncontrollably when I take sight of the woman staring back at me in the glass.

Medium-height—five feet nine inches tall to be exact.

Too thin.

Inky black hair up in a messy bun on top of her head. Black V-neck T-shirt. Black jeans which hug her thighs. Black boots.

Did I say my favorite color is black?

No makeup.

No jewelry.

No bra.

Because I hate bras.

I've always been flat-chested anyways.

I'm sure anyone who must wear a bra hates a bra. I *used* to wear one only sometimes because it's socially acceptable. Not wearing one is "offensive" as Abby says.

As if I give a fuck.

Nowadays, I don't have to.

I catch the shape of the woman in the glass ahead of me just as the afternoon sun dips beneath the horizon, casting this bustling city into an entrancing orange glow, warming the back of my neck.

Reaching up with shaky fingertips, I touch my lips discreetly.

The person in the reflection ahead does the same—our movements are in sync.

And it never ceases to shock me at how I'm somehow connected to the woman in the glass who's staring back at me. She's beautiful, but she isn't who I expect to see, *ever*. It's what makes the mirror magic. Truthfully, I expect to see someone else. I don't know who exactly, but not this stranger who stands there in the flesh, with skin lit up by the sun and an expressionless face. The woman who's making me feel nuts...

Just beyond the glass is a mirror.

Clean.

Tricky.

David Blaine fuck-with-your-head shit.

Her ice-blue eyes are big, and her skin is pale, cheeks pink.

I suppose a human could think she's attractive. Maybe a little rough around the edges like seventy-grit sandpaper and without the usual womanly curves, but nonetheless, attractive. I have that Jared Leto—when he's beardless and super slim—look about me that makes you wonder if I'm a man or a woman.

My chest rises and falls with every breath I take. I stare at myself in the magic mirror and wait, wait, wait for something to happen. Maybe my face will melt off like the Wicked Witch of the West's face did in the *Wizard*

of Oz. Perhaps, I suddenly expect the color of my eyes to change. Or, for my slightly skewed bottom teeth to straighten out.

I don't know what I think, or hope, will happen.

All I know is when I look in the mirror I'm dizzy, pissed the fuck off, sad, confused and that it's *always* been this way.

The woman in the magic mirror is a stand-in.

Her physical appearances play a role.

They help me to get a pass, for now, in a society who loves labels.

So many goddamn labels...

The buzzing of my phone jerks me back to the present. The message is from one of the three B's.

Barry: Where are you?

I crane my neck to the sky above and all the skyscrapers which surround me.

I took a job six months ago as a marketing assistant, working for a man who owns a medium-sized advertising agency called RUF which has an exceptional reputation in this city. It specializes in animal campaigns, which is odd since my boss Barry has the worse pet allergies than anyone in the universe.

The pay might as well be in half pennies, but the hours are mega flexible which is fabulous. I do anything and everything outside of my job description from fetching coffee to picking up dry-cleaning, to flying to Australia on a whim to have a snapping turtle shipped back here, to attending Barry's divorce hearing with him, which was just weird. But anyways, it's a temporary job that'll do for now.

Soon, Benjamin will be pressuring me to settle into something more permanent. *Could I blame him?* Most of my friends who graduated from university the same year I had are now doctors, dentists and lawyers.

They have spouses and children and fucking dogs and cats. Crap like that.

I have no such plans.

None-at-all.

These days I try my best to focus on just putting my underwear on the right way.

My career is the very last thing I'm thinking about, but there *is* something I have in the works. I'm not sure if it shows any promise. Likely not. But it's something I'm quite content to own and take responsibility for even if it gets rejected a trillion times, which it had.

I have a manuscript I've been working on for the past year.

A fucking year.

Can you believe that?

A twice content edited, thrice copy edited, thrice proofread manuscript has been rejected by nearly every single literary agency in New York City.

God, I'm shit.

I suppose it's happened before to someone else in some far distant land or writer's hell. But, I refuse to accept that my precious manuscript, which I'd spent countless hours on, foregoing the bars and the party scenes on the weekends in order to reach the words "the end" had been tossed into the "to be trashed" pile. Or sat on the edge of some literary agent's desk for six months who never bothered to read the first fucking page.

I *hardly* consider myself a writer. I'm not sure exactly at what point a slinger of words actually does. I'm not sure if writing one book makes you a writer. I'm not sure if writing three does either or writing a hundred of them. I'm quite assured I'm no F. Scott Fitzgerald or Ernest frickin' Hemingway, but my words count for something. Besides, it's a story that needs to be told.

I'd learned over the years while I'd been thinking about writing this book that instead of writing the stories everyone else has told a million times over, maybe one day, write a story the world *needs*. A story that will make people think. Even if it forces them to think bad thoughts. Even if it fucking disturbs the shit out of them. Make it unforgettable. Tilt the world with your

words.

And Raziel's story needs to be told.

But I know her story pushes some parameters that literary agents will simply think is too far-fetched to pitch to any publishing house. It isn't some cookie-cutter contemporary bully boy meets doormat girl romance. Or a tragic story about a woman who gets kidnapped. Then said woman gets all Stockholm-y and suddenly falls in love with her captor after he slaps her around a little and damn near rapes her. Maybe calls her a "bitch" a time or two while he's at it. So sexy. But the readers will think he's oh so sexy because, of course, he's a hot billionaire. Or the story about a woman who's been traded up for sex in order to pay off her father's/uncle's/husband's debts. Or some dumb romantic comedy about two men falling in love at work, or two women introduced on a cruise ship, or a man and a woman falling in insta-lust when they meet on an airplane. Blah, blah, blah.

Do we realize how many times all those tropes have been done before?

The world gobbles up those stories.

They're easy to swallow like tiny pills.

People don't want stories that get lodged in their throats.

Those *other* stories are marketable. More marketable than my "depressing work of fiction" one agent had called it, that made him want to hurl himself and his hard-on from the fifth floor of his office building, he'd told me.

Was I surprised at his statement?

Absolutely-fucking-not.

Reaching into my bag, I pull it out, feeling the heft of four hundred and fifty pages between my fingertips, admiring the crumpled edges of the yellowed paper.

My dirty little secret.

Writing a book is a huge accomplishment. Most people would scream

it from the mountaintops. Tell the world about how great it is, even if they think it isn't. Get all their family members and friends to scream and shout about the value of their words. But, not me.

Too scared.

Call me chicken.

Tossing your book out to the world is like waiting for the slaughter and I'm not ready for it yet. I'd much rather take a shuriken to the chest from a team of ninja assassins first rather than the entire world.

I huff and tuck a few loose strands of my hair behind my ear. Looking around, the sun is falling quicker by the minute. The traffic is moving slower and the sidewalk is getting busier. Eyeballing the mass of pages in my hands, my gaze swings from it and to the trash receptacle a few feet away. I grip them tighter.

Hold on just a little longer, River.

I internally debate for about a minute whether I should chuck this entire thing in the fucking garbage and save myself the brutality from the endless criticism. I squeeze it tighter, tighter, tighter, my knuckles turning white, then reluctantly shove it back in my bag.

I breathe.

I'd submitted this story to *two* more agents, but I haven't heard back from them yet. Nothing new there. Waiting to get your manuscript accepted takes centuries. Let's not get started on the length of time it'll take to get it published. And that's only if it gets past the gatekeepers. I'll be practically falling in my grave before we even get to cover selection.

My phone bleeps once more since I haven't responded to the first text. A few more come in from Beatrice, telling me she's at a lesbian hot spot Downtown. I don't think I'll make it to join her, but I don't tell her that just yet.

I wait for Barry's bullshit list.

More boots, sandals, flip-flops and dress shoes pass by as I tap out my text.

Me: I'm close to the office.

Barry: Good, get your skinny ass here.

DO YOU KNOW WHY the word “dead” is part of the word “deadline?” Because you’re usually picking out your coffin by the time you make it there.

Radiohead’s “Creep” sounds from the iPod dock on the bookshelf across the room.

Barry scratches his head of white wispy hair and goes through the pile of kitten photographs spread out on his desk. They’re all horrible but I don’t say a word.

He scratches his chin. “These are terrible.”

I hum a yes.

“Fuck.” His hand lands on the surface of his desk and I worry he’s close to swiping everything off it in a fit of rage as he does sometimes. Mostly on Tuesdays. But today is Friday, so. “I asked them for calicos, not tabby cats.”

“It was all they had.” My face scrunches.

So does Blythe’s.

I shift in my chair, holding my side, trying not to make my wince apparent.

Barry’s eyes shut before he sneezes for the eighteenth time. “I want this d-d-done again.” *Sneeze, sneeze, sneeze.*

“Barry—” I start to say, sweat beading along my forehead, despite that this room feels like Greenland.

“Don’t say it, River,” he growls. “Just don’t.” He spins around in his chair and starts tapping out words on his keyboard with a force I’m sure will break it.

I relax in my chair, tossing Blythe, my every now and again happy hour homie and our full-time photographer, who’s sitting next to me a pitiful glance. She takes the ten-thousand-dollar camera in her hands and sets it on top of Barry’s desk.

His broad back nearly swallows up the entire view of his computer

screen.

Sneeze, sneeze, sneeze.

We have been working on this advertising campaign for six months and it still isn't right. For a man who runs an advertising agency and who had gone to university for marketing and communications, Barry Postlewaite is no visionary and he's about as good at communicating as a bottle of rotten milk is at sufficing a newborn.

Barry complains he asked for calicos, but he did no such thing. He'd never admit to his mistake. He'll simply blame it all on someone else.

Now, we must start this cat food campaign over and the client is beyond irate that nothing is right and we're already past the deadline to deliver. Our entire team is close to going bald and the graphic designer has the shakes from Barry yelling nonstop.

The meows and murmurs from the kittens across the room catch my attention. They're everywhere and into everything. One or two have even pissed on the newspaper that covers the floor. I swear there's at least twenty of them here, filling the room with cries and dander.

"They charged me twenty fucking bucks an hour for these things," Barry grumbles. "Each." He points his index finger to the sky. *Sneeze, sneeze, sneeze.*

Blythe sits forward and runs a hand over her chocolate skin. "Barry, can I make a suggestion?"

Barry grunts in response.

"I don't know if this will work." She sits forward in her chair. "But my sister has a calico."

Barry freezes, pushes his keyboard to the side and spins around in his chair.

Blythe smiles and runs her fingers through her dark hair. "She lives on the Upper West Side." Her brown eyes are pleading. "I know it's late but, I can probably get her to bring her cat here and I can get some shots."

Barry's frown turns upside down then into a frown once more. "A cat."

"Yes, a cat. But she's small. She might not be a kitten, but it could still work."

His thick white brows crash together as he considers the proposal.

Blythe lifts a hand. "It's all we need to get this finished, Barry."

"Okay, bring the cat here," he says.

Blythe stands, squeezes my shoulder and gives me a wink before she rushes off.

Barry's eyes stay on her ass as she heads for the door. He lets out a breath that causes his chest to puff up with the action, then rests his hands on his big belly and stretches out in his chair. His gray eyes move to me.

My phone buzzes.

Pulling it from my pocket, I read the email that stares back at me, flashing in my face like a fucking warning.

LitAgentNumber2900: I wish you good luck with your literary endeavors. I'm sorry to inform you that I'll have to take a pass on this one. Regretfully, I could not relate to the main character.

Of course you couldn't...

Snorting back a laugh, I review the "standard" email response to my manuscript.

I hate when people lie to me. I'd rather LitAgentNumber2900 just have told me the honest truth about what he thought of my manuscript, but he won't do that. People rarely do. They skirt over the truth. Hide their real feelings. Placate you with utter bullshit.

Huffing, I admit a piece of my soul dies a little more with another rejection.

"What is it?" Barry asks, pointing to my cellphone, truly appearing concerned.

“Nothing.”

He circles his index finger in the air. “Is it that book thing?”

My eyes widen as I make the effort to sit forward. “How do you know about that?”

He tosses his hands up in the air. “It was on your desk the other day.” He squints. “‘Raziel’s Story’ or something like that it’s called, right?”

“Yeah.”

Barry glances out the floor-to-ceiling window across the room. “I didn’t read it.”

Good.

“But it looked as though you certainly spent a lot of time working on it.” He taps on the edge of his desk. “I’m not much of a reader but I did read the first page.”

The muscles in my face lock tight.

I thought you said you didn’t read it!

Barry holds a big hand up. “*Just* a few lines from the first page.”

I relax again, staring at my boots.

“Her mouth slants over mine and her tongue delves deeper, sweet and tangy. Pouty, pink and soft. Like the petals of a rose I’m about to pluck until there are none left. The sensation skitters its way over my skin and finds its home between my warm thighs.” He recites the words from memory which stuns me. Then squirms in his chair, blatantly adjusting his junk.

I shoot up from my seat and snatch up my bag.

He laughs out loud. “I’m not much of a literary man, River, but I’d read that shit. What’s it called again? Erotica or something?”

“It’s not erotica,” I mumble.

“It makes my dick hard whatever it is.”

It's supposed to...

I say nothing in response.

The last thing I want to think about is Barry with a hard-on.

“I could read that lesbian stuff all night long before I go to sleep.”

I stand straight, gifting him with a glare that could melt all the fat off his big ass.

“You are a lesbian, aren't you, River?” His face twists in confusion.

No.

“No, I'm not a lesbian,” I growl, heading for the doors.

“Don't you have a girlfriend?” He laughs. “You should really come out of the closet, River. Times have changed! The LGBTQ movement is millions strong. People like me will support you. You have our respect, our admiration, River. We admire how brave people like you are. There's no reason to hide anymore.”

A sharp exhale leaves my nostrils.

Everything Barry's just said is politically correct.

It sounds exactly like something a “straight” person would say...

They pretend to understand or try their best, but they have no fucking clue what someone like me goes through on a daily basis. And Barry's *assumptions* about me prove just as much.

All my life people have been asking me if I'm a lesbian. They often wondered why I was such a tomboy when I was a kid. And why I've always loved sports so much. Because all lesbians love sports, right? Ugh. So fucking ridiculous. Except, I'm not a lesbian. And they always want to know if I like men.

What does any of it matter?

But they never understood.

They never understand someone like me.

Barry is *still* laughing so loudly it shakes his chest.

I have visions of what I would do with the naked woman paperweight on his desk. It's violent, bloody and might break a few teeth. When I spin around, I catch my reflection in the magic mirror across the room I've been trying not to look at since I sat down in here.

Flinch.

Flinch.

Flinch!

More laughter.

Barry is still blabbering. "I have lots of gay friends. In fact, two lesbians live in my building. I'd bet they'd really like each other if they got together."

Because all lesbians like all lesbians?

My face is pulled into a frown at the ridiculous shit that comes out of his mouth.

He *keeps* talking. "And my brother is gay. He's been with his boyfriend for years. Nobody cares, River! It's all good."

"Good night, Barry." I rush for the doors, avoiding the mirror.

And I know if I could ever do magic, I'd make myself fucking disappear.

CHAPTER TWO

THE STREETS ARE LOUD and so is my mind.

The East Village.

A wild place.

Always full of diverse people. A place where people can escape the norm and live amongst those who are part of the counterculture. The home of artists, musicians and hippies. There's a large student population here, since NYU is only steps away, which contributes to the youthful vibe you feel strolling through this neighborhood.

The sidewalks are swarmed with artists and peddlers trying to sell you everything from bath soap to DVDs to crack. Just up ahead are three NYPD officers who march in my direction with purpose. As soon as the peddlers on the street see them, at least a third of them scatter.

I make no attempt to hide my amusement.

I'd left work over an hour ago. I used the time to stop to Roth Jewelers and pay a visit to Benjamin who wasn't there at this late hour. Adam was however. But he was too busy to talk to me. He asked where I'd been since he hasn't seen me in a while and about why I looked so "fucking off." I told him I was just tired, which was a lie.

Because I'm always lying...

Adam gave me a hug along with a kiss and a jab to the shoulder which will surely leave a bruise and asked that I come back tomorrow.

It's debatable if I'll do just that.

Adam and I have a complicated relationship. Always have. *Especially* now that we aren't children anymore. He's close with Benjamin and Abby, as I am, but in a completely different way. He does everything they ask. He's obedient. He has direction in life while mine is just wasting away. I never do what they expect. *Oops*. I'm a fuck up.

I make it to the edge of Tompkins Square Park, then keep walking

until I make it to a dark section at the end of Grove Street.

Curiosity furrows my brows at the man I spot through the glass window of the dimly lit coffee shop. And suddenly I'm also grateful I can't see my own reflection. Only him.

My feet itch to keep moving but instead I stand there plastered to the concrete watching the man, unable to take my eyes off him as he rips open one sugar packet like it's just done something to him and dumps it in his coffee, then stirs.

My eyes dance down the length of his forearm which is covered in sparse hair and sinewy veins to the platinum watch on his thick wrist. Then to the wedding ring on the finger of his left hand. He runs his fingers through his midnight strands and pins me with his green eyes that so often change shade, which sit beneath thick dark brows that are pressed together.

This man always looks annoyed...because he usually is.

Instead of looking as stunned as I do, he simply lifts a hand and encourages me to come inside. When I don't move, his jaw ticks and the come-hither movement he's making with his hand becomes more aggressive. Scowling, he knocks on the glass.

I jump at the sound.

His knuckles make contact with it once more.

I must look like a dumb mannequin just standing here on the sidewalk, eye-stalking someone in the middle of the night. I haven't seen this man in a *while*.

Shit.

I'm not prepared for this.

But here goes nothing.

~

I squirm in my seat and look around the empty coffee shop.

“Human” by Daughter rains down from the speakers above us.

“You look different.” Eli takes a sip of his coffee, leaving the cup to his lips.

Elijah Noam Goldberg.

Thirty years old.

An only child.

Brother’s best friend.

Lots of asshole potential.

Often, I wonder if there’s ammonia moving through his veins in place of blood.

He’s stretched out in the chair across from me, tapping the fingers of his other hand on the surface of the table.

“I cut my hair,” I lie.

Placing the cup down, he smiles but it doesn’t reach his eyes.

I don’t care that I’m sulking. “What are you doing around here?”

“Client meeting.” He rubs at the dark scruff on his jaw.

He’s dressed casually in a fitted T-shirt and dark jeans which hang low on his hips along with wearing boots. His pose is as if he’s sitting on the sofa at home watching TV.

I tip my chin up, disgusted at his laidback attitude and how comfortable he is in his own skin. It isn’t a feeling I can entirely relate to and I find myself mighty green about that. “You have my manuscript.”

He nods and sits forward.

“Have you read it?” I don’t blink.

He nods once more.

My lips purse with annoyance and my chest fills with dread when I decide I think I want to ask him the most obvious question. “Why haven’t

you contacted me then?”

He looks out the window, allowing me the chance to admire his profile and his big gorgeous and very Jewish nose.

Think Adrien Brody, just with *a lot* more swag.

Charming too without meaning to be.

And even when he’s rude he’s still hot as fuck.

“Why do you think, River?” He sits back in his chair.

“Don’t do that bullshit, Eli,” I snap, leaning forward. “I submitted my manuscript to you. Be a fucking professional and tell me what you think.”

With a hum, he smirks. “Validation.”

One word.

Validation.

The action of checking or proving the validity or accuracy of something. The action of begging for confirmation that your work is any good. The action of asking everyone: Am I okay?

Fuck.

“*What?*” I ask as if I didn’t hear his stupid, stupid, stupid word.

“Validation,” he repeats.

My phone is blowing up with more messages from Beatrice. In a frenzy, I shut it off and slam it down on the table. My stomach is full of stones and my jaw is so tight I think my teeth are about to crumble.

Eli extends an arm that surprisingly is still free of ink, palm facing up. “I’ve never seen you like this, River. What’s up with you?”

“Nothing,” I grumble, reaching for his cup and taking a sip.

He says nothing about me taking from him without asking.

“I guess I’m just frustrated with everything. I don’t know. But nothing’s going right.” I let out a breath. “I just got another rejection for my

book. My boss is an asshole. I'm heading to Beatrice after I leave here, and I know she's going to pepper me with a million questions about where I've been—"

"Whaaa, whaaa, whaaa, River." His eyes flash with their moss green, splashing me like vomit. "Fuck."

I gape at him.

"What is this?" He places his big hand on the table.

I swallow hard and almost move to speak but he does before I can.

"Why did you submit your book to me, River, *honestly*." He slants his head to the side.

"I—I—I don't know. I submitted it to everyone who accepts fiction."

"Except it isn't fiction," he snaps.

I lower my eyes to the shiny wooden floors, pressing my lips together. "It is."

"I can't just *accept* your manuscript, River, because you *know* me."

"I'd like to think we're friends." I take a chance to peek up at him.

He grunts before he looks away.

"I thought you would've loved it, Eli," I whisper. "I can't understand why—"

"Oh, don't come in here sounding like some whiny bitch, River. It isn't you." He points a thick finger at me. "You know exactly why your manuscript has been rejected by almost every lit agent in this city."

"Oh, yeah, why?"

He shakes his head.

Slamming his cup down on the table, I lean in. "Why?"

He shakes his head some more.

"Why, why, why, why?"

“Because it’s *shit*, River, that’s why.”

The gypsy woman with blue hair behind the counter eyes our interaction suspiciously.

“Shit,” I repeat.

“Yes, River, shit.” He lets out a breath. “You writers are a dime a fucking dozen. Do you know how many manuscript submissions I get in a day? Fuck. Enough to recycle for a goddamn century.”

“But you read mine?”

“Yes, I read yours.”

“So, what is it *exactly* that you didn’t like about my book?” It’s a challenge. I truly don’t believe he read it. And if he did, he should love it. Shouldn’t he?

If I know one thing about Eli Goldberg it’s that he loves making me squirm.

He presses his full lips together. “Honestly?” His brows lift.

“Yes, honestly.”

The warm scent of vanilla washes over me, calming my senses.

“Well, for starters it’s too long. The dialogue doesn’t flow. Way too much monologue. Boring in some places. Too many analogies. Too many *fucking* nicknames. And why-in-the-fuck are you using words like ‘obfuscate’ and ‘concupiscent?’ I *hate* the relationship with Raziel and Hajile. Entirely too much sex. And the excessive use of the phrase ‘deep breath’ made me want to punch my desk before I even got to the third chapter.” He blinks twice.

I let out a deep breath.

“And there’s a lot of rambling.” He tosses a hand up, flashing me with his wedding band again. The one I’m not sure why he’s still wearing.

I try to swallow once more but I can’t. Because my throat has been slit open by Eli’s invisible blade called “truth.”

And truth is brutal.

Brutality is life.

“Rambling?” I’m offended.

“Yesss, rambling.”

My ears are hot.

I stay quiet about how some changes that were recommended by the editors I pushed back on. Okay... flat-out refused to agree to. So, the “rambling” and all sorts of other weird crap stayed in the book.

“People don’t read fiction to listen to a writer *ramble*, River. They want to read a *story*. They want to fall into your imagination. Get swept up in your words. Taken to some imaginary place that makes them feel all happy inside once they get to ‘the end.’ They don’t want to read a writer’s thoughts on six hundred and sixty-six reasons for *suicide*.” His fist lands on the table, *hard*.

“There’s a reason I included it, Eli.” My voice is timid.

The vein in his forehead is about to burst through his skin. “Oh, yeah, why?”

“Because it’s important to talk about.”

“Who wants to talk about suicide, River!” He reaches into his bag and slams the manuscript down on the rickety table. Then he pushes it toward me as if he wants me to get it away from him as soon as possible. Like it’s a bomb. “Fix it, and I’ll read it again.”

I peer at the white pages and their perfect edges since they’re all held together by professional binding. Eli had kept this manuscript in better shape than I had. Since, as you know, the copy I have rests in the bottom of my bag, covered in coffee stains and melted Tic-Tac’s.

“Maybe it just needs to be edited some more,” I say.

A smile tilts up his lips. “You can’t fix a bad book, River, by editing it.”

I reach for the cold coffee and drink more of it.

“All you end up with is an *edited* bad book,” he growls.

Setting the cup down, I lick my lips.

“It’s your first book, River. So, that means it’s your debut. All first books are shit.”

I nod.

“But, if you don’t want to take my advice, why don’t you just go and self-publish?”

I consider it for a few seconds.

“I’d say you’re not sure if you even want this story out in the world.” His deep voice knocks around in my head when I think about the paralyzing fear I’d feel to have my book out in the world no matter how great anyone says it is, even if I could get it to ever be great. He places his hand over mine.

And there it is...

That silent understanding we’ve always shared. A gentleness through all the fury.

And I’m reminded the man who’s sitting across from me, when he was a boy, used to call me River Blue because he loved the hue of my eyes. Always said they reminded him of the Banyas where his parents once took him when they visited Israel.

No boy had ever said something so sweet to me.

“You’ve always been a real cool dude, River,” he whispers.

I half-chuckle, half almost sob. I swallow it all down and meet his green orbs feeling mine soften. He smiles then gifts me with a big one showing me all his white perfect teeth.

I tip my head forward a few times.

The smoothie machine behind the service counter goes off for about thirty seconds.

I don't move to pull my hand away.

The sensation reminds me of the way he'd touched me so long ago. It all happened in that closet at his parents' humungous house in Boerum Hill, after synagogue, when we were teenagers. We kissed, then in a few lusty gropes and dry humps, I found myself losing my virginity. Panties off. Tits out. Covered in sweat. No caution. No protection. Only irresponsibility floating around in that hot closet. I was lost in Eli as he pounded me into oblivion like any raging hormonal teenage boy would, until I came with his hand plastered over my mouth muffling the sounds. It wasn't planned. It all lasted exactly eight minutes. For all I know, this man has forgotten about it...

Back then, I was so caught up in a boy finally paying attention to me, I got lost. Benjamin would've killed me if he found out what Eli and I had done that day. And Adam would've kicked my ass, then had a good go at Eli if he'd ever known his best friend had fucked his sister. But, I never told a soul. And I don't believe Eli ever did either.

I was the tomboy. The girl no guy ever wanted.

Misunderstood.

Out of place no matter where I found myself.

Lonely.

Ugly.

Only Eli had ever shown me any attention.

And then life happened...

Eli became more immersed in the faith that had guided our entire lives even though we'd gone to college together. He kept his head down much of the time while we were there. He didn't party like most college kids. He put in the work. Swore off sex too. I respected it. Then soon, he graduated with a master's degree in English literature.

A few years later, he got married to some girl his parents had demanded he marry. They have no children. Now, Eli works for a literary agency called Caritas at a swanky address on Suffolk Street building the careers of talent he believes in. Some of which have become world-famous

because of Eli's hard work and dedication.

His life seems to be on track.

I assume Eli must be a millionaire by now. Not that he needs the money. Especially since his dear old daddy has more than enough.

"Is this book fiction, River?" His grip tightens.

I yank my hand out of his clutches feeling defensive. "Of course it is."

He relaxes in his seat once more, hands planted firmly on the table in front of him.

"Why are you still wearing your wedding ring?" I purse my lips.

Considering you're divorced...

The question sprints from my mouth before I can consider reining it back in.

"I don't know." A weak smile tip toes its way across his face.

I search it for whatever I think he's hiding and don't come up with anything.

His eyes twinkle. "I never thought I'd be divorced, River."

"I never imagined a man like you being divorced either." I suck in a breath of air. "If you don't mind me asking, what happened?"

He scratches his chin and groans. "Lots of stuff."

My eyes narrow.

Laughing softly, he doesn't go into any details. "I didn't love her, River."

"I'm sorry."

"There was nothing wrong with her. I mean it wasn't like she was a shit person or anything. She just wasn't right for me." His demeanor is contrite.

I bob my head a few times.

“You can’t put a goldfish with a lion,” he whispers.

“What—”

“I thought you were going to start teaching.” He leans in looking more interested in what I have to say than he did a few minutes before.

Over the last six months, I’d scoped out jobs in some of the schools here in New York City. I’m more than qualified to teach but I debated where exactly would I fit in, especially with the other teachers. I have a tendency to say things which upset the masses. In a room full of students, what could I teach them about the function of society and human relationships? Nothing is right in the world...

Money still rules it.

Religion still ruins it.

I bite my lip. “I’ve thought about it.”

His eyes narrow. “Andddd.”

“Yeah, and as soon as I get my life sorted out, I’m going to start applying for jobs.”

He gifts me with a disbelieving nod.

Even I know that statement is loaded with shit.

“So, I suppose you’re going to keep the *internship* you have right now for a little while then.”

I ignore his dig. “Yeah, it puts money in my pocket.” I lean on my hand.

It’s a funny thing with friends. Real ones anyways. It’s possible not to see them for months, even years and it’s as if you pick up right where you left off when you finally do see each other. And it seems like no time has passed between you and them at all. And that’s what this is like. Always comfortable. Always sacred. *Never* easy.

“Where are you living?” I ask him.

He ruffles his hair a bit. “In a pretty nice place on the Upper East Side.”

“Uh huh.”

“It’s too big really, especially just for me but it’s company dibs, so...”
He shrugs.

“I see.”

I don’t know what I expect him to say next. Certainly not invite me over for dinner or any such thing. Eli Goldberg isn’t the friendly type. He doesn’t *schmooze*. He barely makes small talk. It’s a wonder how he gets on the good side of clients being so standoffish.

“Do you remember when I first shaved my head?” he asks.

A silly smile appears on my face. “Yeah.”

Eli was sixteen years old when his father, who is a rabbi, finally agreed to let him shave his head. The entire thing. Even his payot. And then he shaved his beard. I always thought it was weird back then for a sixteen-year-old boy to have a full-grown beard. Eli hated it. And I think I wanted it for myself. Wanted to touch it and stroke it and take pictures of it. I was curious and envious about everything that made him so masculine.

The muscles. The beard, as I already mentioned. The light smattering of chest hair he had along with his deep voice that did all sorts of weird things to my insides when I was a teenager.

I swung dangerously between being insanely attracted to him and wanting to be just-like-him.

“I felt naked for an entire year.” He laughs. “I was surprised my father had allowed it. My mother was totally against it. I just wanted to look like all the other boys.”

I know the feeling...

“When I left Jewish academy to go to private school, it was like being tossed into a whole other world after being so sheltered.” He laughs. “The drugs. The music. The girls. My mother was convinced I’d land right in

Gehenna if I didn't stay on the straight and narrow.”

I laugh.

Unlike my parents, Eli's folks knew that in order for him to become his own man he had to be with other kids his age who came from different walks of life and religions. Eli fought them on many issues and they pushed back. But they always met in the middle somewhere. Eli was allowed to be himself on most fronts, but the deal was, in other matters, such as marriage and education, he had to do what his parents told him to. After all, they were the ones holding the fat purse strings.

Just outside the window across the street, two men are entangled in an embrace just outside of Big Gay Ice Cream Shop. Eli and I watch them curiously, keeping our nose eyes on them when they kiss. Slowly, we turn to face each other when the two men are done.

“Do you miss it?” I ask without explicitly mentioning the protection and the shelter that our upbringing afforded us.

He taps on the table. “No, most times no, but sometimes I do.”

I press my lips together.

“This world can be a pretty fucking hellish place sometimes,” he says.

“I know.”

“My boss is fucking his secretary.”

Eli's voice lowers. “She got pregnant, so he fired her and demanded she get an abortion,” he whispers. “The poor girl is practically homeless. Then when she tried to tell his wife, he got a restraining order on her.”

“Sounds like some Geraldo shit,” I say.

Eli laughs out loud. “Does that show even still come on?”

“I don't know.” I chuckle. “I honestly don't even know why I even said that.”

“Yeah,” he says softly. “I would've gone with Maury Povich.” He drags his fingers through his hair, allowing me to admire how the dark

strands look against his pale skin. “I watch it sometimes.” He holds a finger up. “Just sometimes when I have the day off.”

I jerk my head back in disbelief.

This upper-crust literary man watches daytime talk show smut?

“I’d imagine you stuck on the Ovation channel. Or the History Channel.” I laugh. “Not using your time to watch the sordid drama of the world unfold.”

He covers his mouth with his hand for a second, then takes it away. “People do all sorts of cruel shit to each other every day. But yet, they’re the ones who feel as though they can judge others.”

Isn’t that how it all works?

He twists his perfect lips. “I see you’re still doing the lesbian thing...”

I’m not a lesbian.

My spine stiffens. “I have a girlfriend, yes. If that’s what you’re getting at.”

“I see.”

I’ve been sitting in this bohemian coffee shop for an hour already. I’m beyond late to my next destination. Beatrice is likely pissed.

“I don’t imagine Adam is happy about that *or* Benjamin,” Eli drawls out.

“No, they aren’t.”

“You know how it is, River.” With a frown, he gazes down at the smooth surface of the table, then lifts his eyes.

Pity. Understanding. Adoration.

I hate when he looks at me that way, but I never know exactly what it means. Always wondered.

“Yeah, I do. I know how it is.” Rushing to stand, the corner of the chair finds my rib cage when I bend over to pluck up my bag. I wince from

the pain but quickly shove it down to that place where I bury all my secrets.

When I straighten up, Eli's big orbs are glowing like stop lights.

He doesn't say what I expect him to.

I wait for it like I'm about to be tossed a tasty bone.

He makes a gesture with his hands. "You wanted the truth."

"Yeah," I quip. "I did."

"Because that's you, River, straight shooter, truth seeker, honest-to-a-fault."

Sarcasm.

Just wonderful.

Resisting the urge to give him the finger, I sling the bag over my shoulder.

He nods, face stiff, that big nose of his tipped back a little bit, his arms stretched out showing off the contour of the muscular chest which I know lingers beneath the threads he's wearing. God, fuck is he attractive, all six foot three, two hundred plus pounds of him even if he really just had carved me a new asshole.

I liked it.

Felt good.

Like hot ice cream.

Sweet pain.

His eyes are still on me, suspicious and annoyed.

"I have to go," I say.

Before he shoves the manuscript back in his satchel, he holds it up for a second. "Fix this *shit*, River, then maybe we could talk."

"Yeah."

“I mean it, River. Thirty days. If not, it’s going in the shredder.”

My eyes widen into excruciating circles. “It took me a *year* to write it, Eli.”

He lifts a shoulder and stares at me blankly. Nothing but disinterest swims in his pupils. Trying to get this man to understand the hard work I’d put into Raziél’s Story would be like asking President Trump to give two less fucks about the cockamamie shit he says...*and* apologize.

It

ain’t

happening!

“Fine, thirty days. I’ll rewrite the goddamn thing.” I make a beeline for the exit.

Glancing over my shoulder, I find Eli still watching me.

I smile half-heartedly.

He winks.

I give him the finger.

“It’s called penis envy, River.”

“Fuck you!”

He laughs.

So do I.

Hold on just a little longer, River.

CHAPTER THREE

WINE. FOOD. FAKE FRIENDS.

These are the love of my life's favorite things.

And they are exactly what fills this table tonight in the restaurant we're sitting in.

"Tonight, Tonight" by the Smashing Pumpkins echoes throughout the busy place.

With the clanking of silverware, dishes and the loud voices of all the patrons in this Italian joint, I feel like we've been dropped in the middle of a Megadeath concert.

I practically have to shout just to hear the words coming out of my own mouth.

Nuzzling my nose into Beatrice's hair, I sniff the fresh scent of her honey-blonde strands that hit the tops of her shoulders then kiss her cheek.

Beatrice Amanda Macaulay.

Thirty years old. A graduate of UCLA law school. Poor time-keeping skills. Rich girl from Calabasas who wanted to escape her life on the West Coast so found her way here to New York City after finishing college.

Beatrice has a great job as an associate attorney at a reputable firm in Midtown. She'd been promoted six months ago. Her career is on its way up just the way she'd always wanted it. The way I promised her it would soon be if she just did her thing.

I met Beatrice in a bookstore in Soho three years ago. I was changing aisles between the art, poetry and music sections while she was in self-help.

Anyways, Beatrice couldn't keep her eyes off me. We skirted by each other once or twice, the material of our jackets brushing every now and again. She asked me what I was into. And I think I was about to tell her "You don't want to know," before I realized she was talking about the books.

She asked why I wasn't in the romance section just as her gaze swept over me, drinking me in from head-to-toe, absorbing the sight of my boots, jeans and the shapeless sweater I was wearing beneath the black leather jacket which cloaked me. Then she retracted her question.

People like me didn't spend time in the romance section. I was into world politics, sports and anything to do with mechanics. Had always been. I'd rather be caught naked and smoking a spliff than snuggled up under the covers at bedtime with some *romance* novel. And if I ever did read romance, it was only for the sex.

Nothing could cure the voracious appetite I had back then for sex. I was just as souped-up for it as any college boy. Blame it on the hormones.

Beatrice snatched up a copy of Jane Austen's *Pride & Prejudice*.

My mouth turned down into a frown.

Every red-blooded, giddy girl's fantasy, right?

Mr. Darcy in the flesh.

God, I was tired of hearing about Mr. fucking Darcy...

Except, Beatrice told me she imagined him as being *Miss* Darcy. Then she giggled like it was the funniest thing in the world.

Beatrice asked me then who was my book boyfriend or girlfriend.

With a tiny, self-conscious smile, I told her Darth Vader with Hannibal Lector coming in at a close second, then maybe throw in Ursula from *The Little Mermaid* for a pretty good third.

Beatrice laughed so loud at my statement she could barely contain it in the quiet bookstore. Only it really wasn't a joke. I was as serious as an elephant giving birth.

I'd never been so attracted to a woman before, not at first glance. By that time in my life, I'd already had girlfriends and one or two boyfriends. But nothing serious. I knew when I met Beatrice she was going to be different. Possibly steal my heart. Ruin me. Devastate my soul. And steal every brain cell from my skull if I ever had any.

And that's exactly what had happened.

After that day in the bookstore, I was sucked into her world. I never wanted her to leave my sight. We spent every day together following that one, then right on our three-month anniversary she told me she loved me.

I remember gaping at her, speechless, my brows knotted so tightly together I thought my face was collapsing in on itself.

I didn't know what to say.

I handled it poorly. My emotions didn't work that way. I didn't fall head over heels for someone quickly. It took me much, much longer to develop the feelings Beatrice had for me in the first three months. So, I did the worst thing.

In response to her declaration of love. Instead of saying those three little words back I said some dumb jerk shit like "Thank you."

Abort. Abort.

She didn't speak to me for a month.

I let her have her space then I wooed her back into my orbit with red roses and a walk in Central Park at dusk like how a proper gentleman would. I apologized, told her I loved her and that was the end of our fight.

The sight of Beatrice's smile yanks me back to the present.

Frankly, I thought she'd be pissed tonight, considering we haven't seen each other in forever. But when I arrived, Beatrice flew into my arms and pressed a kiss to my lips, then ordered more wine. Thank fuck, because I thought I was going to have to defuse a nuclear bomb.

I'm not good at these gatherings.

I can honestly even admit I hate social calls such as this one.

Everyone sitting around a table smiling. Talking shit. Saying a whole lot of garbage but saying absolutely nothing at the same time. Trying to impress each other with the "intellectual" conversations they manage to start about the history of the stiletto and why cucumbers are less fattening than apples. *Real* brain benders.

Plus, I can't stand people who love to hear themselves talk.

For the last hour, I've been blinded by camera flashes since everyone's been taking so many fucking selfies.

I don't live to impress people. I hate it even more that it's all Beatrice seems to like to do. And she also *loves* to talk about herself.

In the last year that we've been together it'd be safe to say things have *changed*.

"And I'm sooooo happy that my girlfriend, River, is *finally* able to join us tonight." Beatrice smiles and her brown eyes swing between mine and the three other sets at the table.

Constance—blonde-haired, buzz cut, talks too much, never washes her hands.

Brianna—honey-brown skin, wild Erykah-Badu-Afro, cries at anything romantic.

Franny—redhead, always talks about sex, jealous, petty, generally just not nice.

"I'm glad I could join you ladies." I poke at the last shrimp in my plate, keeping my eyes low.

Brianna cants forward. Her breasts almost fall out of the low-cut blouse she's wearing when she does. "So, when are you going to propose?"

I almost choke on my own saliva.

The entire table falls into a moment of silence like somebody died.

"I don't think we're ready for marriage," I state without looking at Beatrice.

The tension at the table just kicked up around ten billion notches with the random question.

Damn you, Brianna.

Benjamin and Abby have been married for almost thirty-five years

now. The institution has always been calm. No fighting. No fussing. And if they ever did have a disagreement Adam and I never knew about it. Benjamin is the type of man who doesn't ask many questions. What he says goes and if you need to reject any instruction he's given you, you'd have to have a damn good reason. Abby usually did what he said but she pushed back on some occasions, I think, even if I can't confirm it. It's the only way Adam and I had been allowed so many concessions growing up and had a few niceties I know other kids in our community didn't.

Their marriage was/is a peaceful one.

But a union like that is rare.

Benjamin and Abby are like peanut butter and jelly.

Whereas Beatrice and I are like a fat girl and the gym.

You get the gist...

All eyes are on me, waiting for me to elaborate on my earlier sentence but I have nothing more to add.

The heat emanating from Beatrice's skin warms me. "Why would you assume it'd be River who'll ask?" Her pretty face is tight as she glares at Brianna. She sits up a little more, shoulders high, pink lips tight.

Brianna's lashes flutter, then she visibly swallows. "I don't know. I guess I just assumed."

Everyone around the table looks perplexed.

Did I forget to mention Brianna *isn't* a lesbian? But I bet she assumes I am, just like every other gal at this table does.

"Assumed?" Beatrice practically hisses. "Why?" She glances over at me then back at Brianna. "Why would you assume that?"

A soft sigh leaves me and I'm grateful the noise in the restaurant has picked up.

"Brianna," Beatrice repeats when Brianna says nothing.

Maybe it's my man-bun, absence of makeup and anything that would

make me appear girlish. I'm the less feminine-looking one out of Beatrice and me, so it's therefore *assumed* I'd take on the male role in the relationship. Such fucking ignorant shit.

Beatrice's brown eyes burn.

Brianna shrugs. "Shit, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend anyone. I certainly didn't mean to insult you, River."

Nodding, I toy with my shrimp. "Labels," I say beneath my breath and shake my head.

Beatrice and Brianna bicker. Then Constance joins in. Franny sips her wine.

With my free hand, I squeeze Beatrice's hand beneath the table, attempting to calm her. "I mean come on, fuck. This is supposed to be a fun dinner. With just us gals."

"Yes, exactly," Franny says. "We're all lesbians here, the same, let's not fight."

Brianna stiffens and sits straighter in her chair. "I'm not a lesbian."

Neither am I.

Franny explodes into laughter.

Brianna looks at Franny completely mystified.

"So, I guess what we did the other night never happened," Franny says.

I keep my eyes on Brianna at this very awkward moment. She swallows but it's like she's forcing down acid before she speaks. "No, I didn't say that," she hisses. "But a little experimentation doesn't make me a lesbian."

My brows arch.

"I didn't realize it would still be qualified as experimenting if you've done it like fifty fucking times." After tossing back the last dregs of her wine, Franny shoots up to stand, tosses her napkin on the table and marches off.

The breath that leaves me could wake the comatose. Beatrice mumbles something I can't hear and the table full of women a few feet away from us are already staring.

"I hate drama." Beatrice massages her temples. "It's Friday night."

I rub her back.

Constance laughs and pours more wine for the three of us. "Oh, they'll make up and then come back."

Beatrice shakes her head.

"But I'm not the only one who doesn't understand how Brianna doesn't consider herself a lesbian. She's probably had her pussy licked more times than Jana Cova," Constance jokes.

Beatrice giggles.

I laugh too.

"Why do you feel the need to put a label to her?" I ask, reaching for my wine glass.

Constance's tawny brows crash together. "I don't see it as a label."

The tip of my head forward encourages her to enlighten me.

"We are who we are, right? I mean, come on. I like girls. Therefore, I'm a lesbian. I own it. I love it. I'm proud of it. Refusing to label yourself when it comes to sexual orientation..." Constance pauses. "Tells me you're ashamed of who and what you are." Her expression is serious as if what she'd just said is the law.

"Ashamed," I repeat the word.

"Yes, *ashamed*." She sits back in her chair. "Or confused."

I consider jussst for a second throwing my wine in her face, soaking that pretty white blouse with it, imagining it's her blood.

"Don't you consider yourself to be a lesbian, River?" With the lift of her stupid left brow, Constance gestures toward Beatrice with her hand, palm

facing up. “You have a girlfriend. You’re a woman. That makes you a lesbian, doesn’t it?”

So simple...

Constance waits for my response. “Unless you like men too, then that would just mean you’re bi-sexual. Nothing to be ashamed of.”

Ah, labels again!

Beatrice tenses and gives me that look she always does, telling me DON’T.

“I don’t believe in labels.” I drink more wine.

“Because love doesn’t need labels,” Constance states.

“No, it doesn’t,” I say plainly, realizing on some level maybe Constance understands where I’m coming from, even if I’m rocketing into this planet’s atmosphere from fucking Saturn. “Labels are stifling. They confine you to be one thing. And I think people who want to assign one label to a person are doing the human race a monumental disservice.”

These days we have more labels for sexuality than there are ants in the world: queer, lesbian, bi-sexual, asexual, straight, pansexual, sapiosexual, fluid...

Christ!

Constance sits back in her chair, *possibly* listening.

Beatrice is like stone next to me. One more sentence from my mouth and she might crumble like the junk on top of the unfinished slice of apple pie in her plate.

“If I define myself as being straight and suddenly find myself attracted to or in love with a woman what does that make me?” I ask.

Beatrice pins me with her brown eyes.

Constance stares at me blankly.

“If I say I’m a lesbian and I find myself attracted to a man, what does

that make me?" I hurl them another question. "These are all possibilities. So, instead of assigning myself a 'label' I'd one day have a hard time peeling off my goddamn forehead, I prefer just not to stick it there."

Beatrice exhales.

"So, you like men?" Constance folds her arms across her chest.

"Yes." I grace her with the truth.

Beatrice stiffens even more.

"So, why are you with Beatrice?" Constance questions.

"Because I love her," I say.

Beatrice smiles. It's an annoyed smile. But nevertheless, it's a smile.

"So, then you're bi-sexual." Constance is still attempting to label me.

She clearly doesn't get it...

"Sexual orientation has *nothing* to do with gender identity, so..."

Laughing a little, I fiddle with the linen napkin on the table in front of me.

"What if I told you I'm a man."

A tiny gasp leaves Constance.

"Did you know River wrote a book?" Beatrice's voice is loud as she takes over the conversation in her lawyerly way.

I slump back against my chair, observing the confusion smeared all over Constance's face. If she heard that then no doubt she's attempting to make sense of my sexual orientation from there. If I'm a man on the inside and I like women, wouldn't I be straight and if I like men wouldn't I be gay? It's enough questions to puzzle even Stephen Hawking if he were still alive.

But, enough with the labels!

Constance's next question I suppose, even if it's in her head, it's still rude as fuck...But, I presume she wants to know if I have a dick. Maybe she already knows I don't have a dick. Fuck knows.

But, if I could have a dick, I'd want it to be huge.

Like huge huge. Scary huge.

A weapon of mass destruction.

The bringer of faith.

The giver of life.

An appendage to be worshipped.

Something that would make you want to go home and slap yo' mama.

I digress...

Beatrice is still blabbering on about the book I need to rewrite. No one is listening to her. I'm still waiting for Constance to ask more questions. She clearly needs a minute to gather her wandering thoughts.

"When do you think it will be published, River?" Beatrice asks.

Never.

"I suppose it will be soon. I know it will be soon." Beatrice goes on, talking about the book as though it's the best piece of literature ever produced, praising it as though it'd be up for the fucking Pulitzer.

Not my book/disaster/shit.

"It won't be, Beatrice." My statement is a fact.

Beatrice twists around to face me head-on. "What do you mean?"

"I mean it won't be published any time soon. It has some issues," I say.

"*Issues?*" she repeats, fluttering her lashes. "Issues such as what?"

"It needs to be rewritten." I gesture for the waitress, desperate.

Beatrice is still singeing my epidermis off with her glare.

With the mediocre job I have working for Barry, I'm aware that to Beatrice, getting Raziel's Story published is the only thing I have going for myself. And now that's not going to happen, I'm assured I've just sunk her battleship.

The entire time I've been sitting in this restaurant all I've been thinking about is how I'm going to fix this book: insert chapters, delete chapters, review paragraphs, change all the nicknames, make Raziel less crazy. *How do you make someone less crazy?* Cut down the sex scenes which Eli had said were too explicit, delete the phrase "deep breath."

I let out a deep breath.

I never understood the term "too explicit." The same people who have all the sex in real life can't stand to read about it. Odd. They're like the sex police. Do it. Just don't talk about it. Keep it undercover. Confuses me. At least my thoughts are out in the open. No secrets. No lies. The reader gets to see just how far down Dirt Lane we can go. And boy oh boy can we go far.

Besides, in Raziel's Story, if I delete all the sordid sex scenes, you'll never understand the primal relationship she has with the woman she loves. It's an integral part of the character development in the story.

Eli doesn't understand.

Sex is important. Only the people who don't have it think it isn't.

Hmmm.

It all makes me wonder if Eli's been getting any lately...

Likely not.

When the waitress makes it over I ask for more wine.

Beatrice scoffs. "River, I thought that whole writer's convention thing you went to was to help you get this book published." She leans in, dusting me with the sweet scent of her perfume I love to smell but don't want all over me. "I thought it was supposed to help."

I'd gone to no such conference.

Like I told you before, I'm always lying...

I reach out and cup her cheek. "I'll explain it all later, Beatrice." I drink from the new glass of wine in front of me, wishing it was bottomless.

Beatrice forces a smile. "Well, the book is about a Jewish girl who

was born into the wrong body in a dystopian world that's a lot like how New York City would probably be a thousand years in the future. I guess you could say it's science fiction. Anyways, she invents this machine. Think *Total Recall*-type stuff. But instead of the machine implanting vacation memories in your brain, it *wipes* your memories altogether."

Constance looks bewildered. "What?"

Yeah, stupid, I know.

"So, if you had ever experienced something awful. An attack. A rape. A devastating accident. This machine wipes that memory and the person who suffered it is no longer affected by anxiety, paranoia, depression or PTSD or whatever." Beatrice is pushing to sell me like I'm fifty percent off when I should be free. "Raziel helps millions of people. She falls in love with another woman, but the woman breaks her heart.

"One day, Raziel is desperate. She goes into the machine she created but the memories of their love are so powerful she can't erase them. She starts to lose her mind. And the machine is so full of bad shit, it can't take anymore. It can't help the one person left in this world who's suffering...a little boy whose mother had died. By this point Raziel is already kind of insane. Everyone she loves turns their backs on her. So, in the end, in order to help the boy in the story, she empties the machine of all the memories into her mind and ki—"

"Beatrice, please." I place my hand on top of hers, *begging* her to stop talking.

Her brown eyes widen. "Okay." She sits back and remains silent.

Beatrice faces her friends when Brianna and Franny return to the table with mussed hair and smudged lipstick.

"Is everything okay, ladies?" Beatrice keeps her eyes on *them* and refuses to look at *me*.

The cold shoulder. How icy it is. Like being sideswiped by the Arctic or having my face shoved in nitrogen.

Whatever.

The two ladies mutter “fine” and make themselves more comfortable in the chairs.

“What did we miss?” Brianna wiggles her penciled-on brows.

“River, thinks she’s a man...on the inside,” Constance blurts out, smirking.

Is this a joke?

Beatrice knocks over her wine.

I catch my reflection’s eyes in the broken pieces of wet glass on the table.

Flinch.

Shut my eyes.

Open them.

Flinch again!

Motherfucker.

CHAPTER FOUR

“WE AREN’T READY FOR marriage?” Beatrice drops her purse down on the foyer table then kicks off her shoes violently.

With a sigh, I stroll by her and head into the kitchen.

“Why would you say something like that to my friends, River?” She stomps over to the fridge, yanks it open, grabs a bottle of wine and pours herself a glass.

Finding a spot far from her warpath, I lean against the counter, conscious of how tender my armpits are. I wince then cover up the pain.

She flicks her hair and knocks back the wine in the glass in one gulp.

We’re in Beatrice’s apartment on the Upper West Side. That dinner with Franny, Brianna and Constance had gone on for one more hour. I swear it was the most painful hour of my life. Similar to passing a kidney stone.

Beatrice slams around more things, then starts unloading the dishwasher.

“We aren’t ready for marriage, Beatrice.”

She stills completely, doesn’t make eye contact.

I’m in that chilly town of hers again...

“We’ve been together for three years, River.”

Have we really?

I shove my hands into my pockets.

Over the course of our relationship, Beatrice and I had spent more time apart than together. There’s massive dysfunction. We argue for every reason in the solar system, but I love her. She must know that. People stay in dysfunctional relationships all the time. It’s yours. You love it. Even if you know it doesn’t work properly. It’s like having a demented cat. It’s crazy but you wouldn’t give it away even if someone offered to pay you for it.

“You’re angry with me,” she whispers.

“Well, for starters I asked you not to mention my book to anyone.” I rub my jaw. “And then did you really have to talk for an entire hour about how your parents own this and that and celebrity name dropping with every other sentence? It was *annoying*.”

Beatrice kicks the dishwasher closed and spins around to face me.

I relax against the kitchen countertop and observe her, realizing how different we are. I’ve never had these qualities that Beatrice possesses. The emotions. All the girl shit to its *full* effect. The constant crying. The epic tantrum throwing. The whining and the bitching until I get my way. It’s never been me. I’m wired differently. Perhaps, mine are tangled.

Her eyes water over.

Shit.

She runs her fingers through her hair, then presses her palm to the center of her chest leaving it there. “I’m sorry, I just thought it’d be nice to talk about the book, River. Why is it such a secret? I thought they’d be impressed.”

“It isn’t my aim to impress people.”

“Is that why you keep that assistant job then?”

With narrowed eyes, I stand straighter, taller, bigger. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing.” She reaches for her glass of wine, taking a few more swigs. The clink of it when she places it back down is loud. She’s pissed. She’s always pissed at me.

I’ve never measured up to Beatrice’s expectations.

“I just wish you’d be like a normal girlfriend, River, you know. Hang out with my friends. Not be so damn secretive all the time. Get a real job...one that matches what you spent five years in university for. Not fetching Barry’s steak lunch or buying his underwear.”

Pushing off the counter, I eat up the space between us in a few strides.

Eyes wide, she glares at me.

“I am normal.” It’s my first statement and I dare Beatrice to argue. “I just don’t fit in with your friends and that’s fine with me.” A tiny laugh leaves me. *Besides, I think they’re idiots anyways.* “I’m not the one that’s going to do everything you want, Beatrice, exactly the way you want it.”

Her lips press together.

“We’re supposed to be a couple, remember?” I remind her.

“Yeah,” she quips. “But I haven’t seen you in *forever*, River. Besides, you’d think by now we’d be living together. We’d be planning a wedding. And maybe some kids.”

Too many words.

They hit me like a shot of saké.

A powerful slap to the chops. Strong. Unforgettable.

Too much. *Way* too much.

Admittedly, there’s nothing wrong with what Beatrice is asking me for. This is what couples do, right? They date. They meet each other’s parents and shit. They settle down, get married and have children. I’m keenly aware that nothing Beatrice is asking me for is out of the ordinary. Except, I know in the murky pits of my soul I can’t give it to her. What good are promises if you plan to break them?

I inhale sharply through my nose. “I need more time, Beatrice.”

It’s a lie.

I’ve always known Beatrice and I didn’t fit together like that. And we don’t live together because I can’t live with *anyone*. I have too many secrets. Besides, I could never convince Beatrice to move to Brooklyn. She’d *never* agree. It’s my excuse for never asking her instead of admitting that the thought of another person being in my apartment, my personal space, didn’t make me feel like I was on the cusp of having a full-blown anxiety attack.

Beatrice would toss out my furniture—the good stuff I’d fished out of dumpsters and bought from bargain basements around this city. She’d rip my

pop art down from the walls. Beatrice would convince me to get rid of Wiley, my ten-year-old mut with the bum leg who she snarls at each time she sees him. And he'd be homeless again. The same way he was when I'd found him limping along Bleeker Street. Beatrice would buy better curtains. She'd cover my sheet-less queen-size bed with fifteen hundred thread count linens, frilly pink cushions and expensive throws from Bed, Bath & Beyond or someplace.

I live like a messy bachelor.

Just the sight of my cramped, one-bedroom apartment would scare most people. It sends Abby into Molly Maid mode every-single-time she sets foot inside it.

“You can't keep telling me you need more time, River.”

I cup her cheek with my hand, feeling her warmth, allowing the shudder that vibrates her entire body to move through me. A tiny, sad earthquake that reminds me she loves me, almost desperately. And that she needs for me not to hurt her.

“You're afraid of commitment,” she whispers.

Bingo.

It's why I don't have credit cards, or a mortgage, or a car note...

“No, it's not that, Beatrice,” I lie.

“It is. It absolutely fucking is.”

I press my lips to hers, stopping her words, calming her even if it's only temporary. My tongue delves deeper into her mouth, tasting the sweet woody flavor of the merlot which lingers on her tongue. My hand slips down the front of her jeans. She moans. I groan. My weight presses her against the cabinets. And I'm at it. Wanting her all over again. Even though earlier tonight I swore to myself I wouldn't touch her since all she was giving me was evil attitude.

“Are you going to stay tonight?” she pants out.

“Yes.”

Her hand slides to my nape as she pulls me closer. “I just want you to

be like me, River.”

I squeeze my eyes shut at her words that cut me, cut me, cut me.

I'll never be like you, Beatrice.

“Yes, okay,” I agree.

~

“God, fuck me!” Beatrice’s open palm finds the headboard. Her fingers curl over the top of it. Her back arches. She screams more.

My hands are planted firmly on her hips and all I can do is stare at the glory in front of me, listen to her cries and moans of pleasure and the pounding of my heartbeat in my ears.

My lips are swollen and my mouth tastes of her since I’ve spent the last hour consuming everything between her thighs. All Beatrice wants tonight is more.

Good

girl.

She rocks her ass into my crotch taking all eight inches of the huge cock strapped to me. Glancing over her shoulder, her brown eyes meet mine. She bites her bottom lip.

I fuck her some more.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

My hips slam into her meaty ass causing it to jiggle.

And with each stroke more sweat drips from my brow. I stop for a moment as Beatrice does a shimmy. I crane my neck to the ceiling fan above us and breathe. Her thighs quiver. And her pussy has my undivided attention once more.

My hand finds her shoulder.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

I hang my head low and watch as her greedy slit gobbles up the girth of this thing. It drags along her walls, causing them to part so exquisitely, teasing her lips which grip it each time it slides in and out of her wetness.

“Oh, God,” she murmurs, and I know she’s close.

I fuck her more, more, more until she’s screaming and the neighbors no doubt know my name is River. And that Beatrice believes in God.

My mouth falls open at the sight in front of me.

Each time I slam into her ass, my clit throbs sending the most intense sensation crashing through my thighs like a big, violent tsunami.

A helpless sound leaves me just as Beatrice demands more.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

The squelching of her pussy around the cock is gorgeous. Absolutely fucking gorgeous. My pussy pulses, *dying* for its relief, begging me to stop holding back and let it rip. My own wetness trickles from me and down my thighs. My brow creases as I look down as it drips, drips, drips down my pale skin. It’s something I’ve always been ashamed of. The intensity of how I feel things, especially during sex. I’ve always been the kitten who has the sex drive of a lion during mating season three hundred and sixty-five days a year.

I hiss.

Beatrice whimpers.

I lick my lips still tasting her on me.

Swinging my head to the left, I catch sight of our reflections in the dresser mirror.

Flinch.

Moan.

Flinch once more.

I look away and focus on the task at hand. The one that has my heart threatening to rip through the front wall of my chest and my core exploding.

A cry of agony leaves me.

Beatrice is still moaning out my name.

Most of the time we kiss. She allows me to shove my face between her thighs and lick her pussy that's always been my friend. But once in a while, Beatrice allows me to do this to her. And tonight, I'm particularly hungry.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

I'd be an asshole not to acknowledge that Beatrice has made certain concessions in her life for me. She's embraced most of me, though still not yet all.

I love her, I do.

Her ungodly yelp yanks me back to the hot present.

Leaning forward, I slide my hand around her sweaty throat and place a fierce kiss to her mouth. I pound into her with my entire weight having no mercy on her soul. My hand finds her shoulder. I keep her steady as I plow into her. And soon my own orgasm rips through me just as hers does.

Her face is buried in the mattress.

I deliver one tender slap to her ass cheek and slide the cock out of her.

"Do you want more, Beatrice?" Panting, I dip down to her pretty pink slit.

She only moans a good moan.

My tongue darts out and into her wetness, sucking on each lip until it's quivering, begging. "I love you, Beatrice."

She smirks, mischievous and sexy as hell.

I run my hand over the swell of her ass cheeks and *feast*.

~

"Why are you still wearing your T-shirt?" Beatrice drags her fingers

over the soft cotton which touches my skin.

It's some late hour.

We're lying side by side beneath the sheets staring at the red brick wall across the room. The air-conditioning unit on the wall high above us hisses with the cool air it expels. "Sweet Jane" by the Cowboy Junkies echoes softly from the iPod dock on the nightstand.

I lift a shoulder and roll over to face Beatrice.

"Did you mean what you said at dinner?" She looks away from me.

"What?"

"That you feel like you're a man." Her eyes grow watery.

"Yes," I say without hesitation.

She exhales. "Why are you just telling me this now?"

I drag my fingers through my messy hair. "Honestly, I thought you already knew."

"No." She huffs. "I mean yes, I guess maybe a little bit but..." She runs her fingers over my jaw, then brushes over it with the back of her hand. She's regarding me with squinted eyes. "You seem different."

"Because I am," I whisper.

"And when you say you feel like you're a man inside, River, what *exactly* does that mean?"

"It means my life will finally seem right if I'm more aligned on the outside with how I feel on the inside."

She bites her lip, then licks it. "You *want* to be a man."

"Yes."

"Physically, on the outside."

"Yes."

My heart pounds even though I'm resting. In fact, it sinks down

somewhere near my spleen and lodges all my other organs out of place. It's apprehension and fear but some part of why it's thumping at a dangerous speed is because I've finally told the truth. Well, part of it anyways.

Beatrice shoots up to a sitting position, glowering at me.

I'm plastered where I rest against the pillows, my legs stretched out against the cool white sheets as I meet her watery orbs.

"Where have you been, *really*?"

"I—" I almost get the words out, but they disintegrate in my throat for the cheap lies they are.

"River." Her voice is high-pitched. She rushes from the bed toward my bag in the chair.

I practically catapult from the mattress behind her but she's already going through it, dumping all the contents out.

"If you don't want to tell me then I'll find out myself." She finds my phone, unlocks it and goes through all the messages.

I remain still but keep my eyes on what I truly don't want her to notice. "Are you satisfied?" I question when she stops tapping into the device.

Her hands find her sides as she investigates the floor. Soon her eyes land on the red packet. She bends forward and plucks it up before I can nab it from her. She drops the phone in my bag and focuses on what's in her hand.

The earth is collapsing.

My world is about to die.

"What is this?" A tear slips from her eye. "Why are you taking this, River?"

I stay silent.

"We never talked about this. You should've consulted me about this."

Heat crawls up my spine. It leaves the back of my neck slicked with

sweat and then blazes my cheeks staining them red. The rage that moves through my veins at her arrogant statement is unexpected.

Consult her?

This is MY life!

Did she consult me when she decided to move to Mexico for six months? Did she consult me when she forced me to spend Christmas with her family last year? Did she consult me when she cancelled our gym membership without asking?

No!

“Why are you taking this, River?” She scrutinizes the injection packet in her hand.

“I’m going through menopause.” I don’t rip my eyes away from hers.

My dumb joke falls as flat as a Paris Hilton album.

Beatrice tosses the packet at me.

Luckily, I catch it.

“You’re injecting yourself with hormones.” She folds her arms across her naked chest and looks away from me as if I disgust her. “Fucking hormones.” She sucks her teeth. “So, what, you’re going to grow a fucking beard now?”

Already have.

Her eyes lift to meet mine. “And what else?”

“And everything else that comes with it.”

“You haven’t been working out?” She points at me.

“No.”

“But you have muscle in places you didn’t before.”

“Probably,” I say.

“And your voice is deeper. I wasn’t sure before but now I can hear it a

little.”

I nod.

She wipes the wetness from her cheeks. “This is crazy, River.”

There’s that rage again, boiling just beneath the surface of my skin.

“And what about us, River?”

“I’m still me.” It’s a statement but it comes out more like a plea.

For her to understand.

For her to forgive me.

For her to still love me.

Beatrice covers her face with her hands. “How could you not tell me about this, River?”

“I’ve been trying to tell you for a while now, Beatrice, but you wouldn’t listen.”

She weeps.

And her pain is my pain. So, it hurts me too.

“I should’ve told you. I should’ve talked to you about it more, but you only would’ve stopped me. And I had to do this for me. You have no *idea* what I go through every day just being me.”

“What you’re doing to yourself, River. These changes...are irreversible!”

Stepping in her direction, I reach for her wrist.

She yanks it away from me and shoots me a brown-eyed glare that could start a wildfire. “You’ve decided what it is that you want.”

“Yes, I have.”

“And you expect me to still want you.” Her brows collide.

I swallow down the poison that’s gathered in my throat. “Yes.”

Beatrice snuffles. “River, I want a *woman* by my side.” She cries more. “Not a man. I don’t want to lie next to some hairy beast made of muscle, who stinks of masculine sweat and who leaves stubble in my bathroom sink because he needs to shave every morning. I don’t want that. If I wanted that, I’d be with a *man*.”

Thing is, I shouldn’t be surprised by everything she’s telling me.

But I am.

She’s breaking up with me. She’s *really* breaking up with me. Shit-is-real.

You’ll never be who she wants you to be.

You’ll never love her the way she needs to/should be loved.

You’ll never be normal, River!

WHAT THE FUCK IS NORMAL!

My fingertips shake when I bring them to my warm cheek.

Beatrice isn’t a bad person. Nothing she wants from me is beyond what I should want to give her. But, I’m not a lesbian. It’s the number one problem here. The fracture that’s always been present in our relationship. The one fact that’s always scared the crap out of her.

Am I surprised she’s upset?

Absolutely not.

But strangely, I still find myself annoyed...maybe at myself.

They told me about all the anger and aggression I’d feel. Said it would all be a result of the testosterone I’ve been taking. My monthly visitor/life-ruiner had already stopped. *Bye, bitch*. And a few times throughout the day, I’d have flickers of feeling like how I should, but I’m not quite there yet...

Beatrice is still crying.

I stand in front of her uncomfortable, like I’m on trial.

Feeling cruel for lying to her. Feeling guilty for hurting her. Feeling bad I'd made a choice and I'd picked me over us. I'm a selfish, selfish, *selfish* man.

Every-single-tear that slides down her cheek beneath the moonlight feels like a flood that's washing all the memories we've made over the past three years away. And I don't know what to say or do, besides to stand here like a fool and let it happen.

This *really* fucking hurts.

It's like that thing you're dreading doing. Like getting your wisdom teeth pulled. Or cancelling your Netflix membership. Or telling your hairdresser of ten years you're parting ways. You put it off for as long as you can until you can't put it off any longer. Then BANG.

"Please get out, River."

"Beatrice." Her name leaves my mouth with a tiny gasp.

She holds a hand up. "Just get out."

~

It's after four o'clock in the morning by the time the worst Friday night in history ends and I'm home. Standing outside on the sidewalk, I absorb the sounds of the streets.

Honking horns. The distant scream of sirens. The chatter of people wandering through this neighborhood. Most sober, I think. Others visibly very drunk.

A warm breeze washes over me along with the cigarette smoke from my neighbor, Chico, across the street who's sitting on his stoop finishing one off. He lifts a hand then goes back to tapping away at his phone.

I love the smell of Brooklyn—briny like the ocean and earthy like old brick.

I grew up here after all.

When I first started looking for an apartment I knew it *had* to be here.

Brooklyn is a place that has a long and venerated literary history.

It was once home to Truman Capote, Norman Mailer and Walt Whitman. And is the setting of one of my favorite stories, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* by Betty Smith which chronicles the life of a girl named Francine as she grows into a teenager. I worshipped that story when I was growing up, reading it over and over again until I virtually could recite it word for word.

Brooklyn is less shiny and way less glitz than New York City. Low-key. Super cool. Not boasty, though it has a lot to be proud of. It's a place where I feel at home.

Brooklyn sits on the very edge of Long Island. It's bigger than New York City and people are often surprised at how many nice beaches stretch along the thirty miles of shoreline here.

Ultimately, I decided on Park Slope. A neighborhood full of an eclectic mix of people: artists, musicians, office workers, students.

I amble through my apartment clicking on the lights. Wiley follows behind me. Stooping down, I pull him into me and kiss his face all over. He barks a few times and wags his tail, showing how excited he is to see me.

“What'd you do today, boy?” I scrub him on the head.

My Rastafarian neighbor, Tosh, walks Wiley for me most days of the week seeing he stays home much of the time stretched out on his sofa watching documentaries. It's a favor I appreciate since my work week is usually spent running around for Barry.

Wiley moves to find a space for himself on the sofa.

Snatching up the remote control, I click the stereo on. “Limo Wreck” by Soundgarden booms from it.

When I make it to the kitchen, I drop my bag on the counter and pull a beer from the refrigerator. In less than a few gulps, it's gone. I settle the empty bottle back down on the counter and accept that I feel like utter shit.

I called Beatrice after I left her apartment. She didn't answer. I don't know why I had expected her to. All twenty of my calls went straight to voicemail. Rejected. So, I started to type out a text, then my fingers froze on

the keys because I had no idea what to say.

Why must I always apologize for who I am?

No one else does.

Fuck.

The beat from the music and the heavy guitar rift floats around in my head.

I crack open another beer and guzzle it down.

Since I was a girl, I remember apologizing *all* the time. To Abby for not wanting to wear dresses. To Benjamin for not being the daughter he'd always wanted. To Adam for having a better right pitch than him. To my few friends, who were girls, when I was around seven or eight years old for not being more feminine. To my buddies for not being more feminine. To overly *concerned* teachers who had my best interest at heart when they felt I was slipping from the teachings of the Torah. To other irritating family members who worried I was becoming more boy than girl. To the blabbering Russian woman at the corner store because I never followed her advice on the tampon brand she recommended.

Why the fuck am I always apologizing!

Kicking off my boots, I march into the bathroom and do exactly as I always do. Standing in the darkness with my finger on the switch, I debate if I want to turn it on. Every morning I go through this shit, maneuvering myself around the bathroom in the semi-darkness trying my best not to look at my own face!

My chest heaves. Heat slicks my skin all over. The alcohol is suddenly moving through my veins turning my head hazy. A splatter on the floor near my socks only ratchets up my panic.

I'll never be what they want me to be.

I'll never fit into those stupid little boxes people want to put me in.

I wonder what it would be like...

What it would feel like to be just like everyone else.

I wouldn't have to live the way I must. Always hiding. Always lying.
Never happy.

My finger lingers on the switch but I daren't flick it.

The music has stopped, and the apartment is tossed into an eerie
silence.

And before I know it more tears are falling from my eyes so quick
and thick I think I'm drowning. They hit the tile at my socked feet.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

More tears fall.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

A loud, ugly sob rips from me and I cry more because I can't
remember the last time I shed any tears. The frustration leaves me with each
pathetic heave for breath I make.

"Fuck it." I flick the light on and stay facing the wall.

I'm hesitant in my movement, so cautious you'd think a silverback is
hiding behind the shower curtain. But there's only me here and my enemy.
Me.

With tentative steps and keeping my head low, I stare at the white
porcelain sink.

Then, I lift my head.

Flinch.

Stop being a coward!

I force myself to face myself.

My foe.

Me!

Reaching a hand up, I touch my face, feeling the contours of my pale
skin, absorbing the sight of my sapphire eyes that people always tossed me

compliments for.

To the left of me is the electric razor I've been using lately to keep my face beardless. Next to it are all the toiletries I use. There isn't one strawberry-scented thing in the pile. It all smells of patchouli and sandalwood and man!

I face myself once more.

Flinch. Flinch. Flinch.

But I keep looking and my tears keep falling, down, down, down my hot cheeks like acid rain.

Gritting my teeth, I inhale sharply through my nose and face her. "I hate you." Reaching out, I touch the magic mirror. "I-hate-you." I say it once more. This time with more rage. "I HATE YOU!" The three words fire from my mouth like bullets and I don't avert my eyes. "Why can't you just be like everybody else? You stupid, ugly, selfish BITCH! I hate you! I hate you! I HATE YOU!"

One swipe of my tears with my fisted hand.

It collides with the surface of the mirror over and over.

Breaking. Shattering. *Splintering*.

As I am.

Blood. Blood. Blood.

It's *everywhere* along with the broken glass at my feet.

I weep.

Eventually, I find myself sitting on the floor with my knees to my chest and sobbing into my hands. It feels as if a century passes before I calm, and my thundering heartbeat returns to a safe rate.

Where is that goddamn memory-wiping machine when you need it?

Laughing a little to myself, I collect my shit, forcing my tears to ease.

If Eli were here, he'd tell me to stop whining like a little BITCH.

Marinating on that thought, I *breathe*.

After less than a minute, I decide yesterday morning is the last time I'll ever be shaving.

Fuck *their* normal.

I'm sick to death of apologizing for who I am.

I won't do it anymore.

CHAPTER FIVE

FRESHLY DUMPED AND WITH a wrapped and hurting hand clutched to my chest, I make my way down Lexington Avenue.

Tame Impala's "Keep on Lying" explodes in my head through the earbuds in my ears. I'd only gotten off the phone a few minutes ago with Barry. I'd told him I needed time off. He asked me how much. I said I didn't know but I just needed a few weeks.

He almost shit a whole brick through the receiver before he reluctantly agreed.

Who couldn't use time away from Barry...

Ugh.

The warm July morning air washes over me. The Chrysler Building looms high above with the blue sky as its backdrop. I bob my head to the music admiring the smiles and frowns of all the people who pass me. And they're all different.

Young. Old. Happy. Sad. A spectrum of complexions, nationalities and races.

I take pride in that.

What would the world be like if we were all the same?

I'm not sure if you realize it yet, but I was born in the wrong body.

I know it sounds like toilet talk, but it's true.

My soul was put in the wrong body. That's what I believe. I've felt this way since as far back as I can remember. Like God made a monumental mistake putting me in this one.

It's possible, isn't it?

But many would say God doesn't make mistakes...

However, I believe that the universe is full of glitches.

Let's suppose with everything God must keep his eyes on—preventing world wars, stopping murders, keeping our world leaders in order, making sure the right people get to Heaven and all the bad ones go to Hell. We could go on until next winter about the world's atrocities. Of course, I could even get into how he finds the time to keep all his angels in line. You know, making sure they don't run amuck up there in that beautiful place above the clouds where everything is perfect. Since we know all God's angels have always been in competition with each other.

Sounds silly, doesn't it?

God is sooooo busy. It's possible for a slip up, isn't it? He's too preoccupied to get it *all* right.

On the grand scale of God's responsibilities, the error of putting me in this wrong body is like a typo. Tiny. Insignificant in his world. But we all know a typo can change an entire sentence. Make it mean something totally different. Change the writer's intent and cloud the reader's interpretation. Small errors lead to big misunderstandings.

But it's okay, I forgive him.

I'm going to fix his error.

I intend to correct that fucking typo of my life.

God's folly has caused me a world full of pain and frickin' inconvenience. I suppose things could be worse though. He could've made me ugly.

Hold on just a little longer, River.

At five years old, I used to bawl when my mother would dress me in the mornings. Abby would mutter against my cheek. "Ty harna divchyna," which meant "You are a pretty girl," in Ukrainian. I never listened. Abby insisted that girls had to wear sundresses and tutus and boys got to wear pants. I wanted to wear pants like Adam. I felt we were the same. Everything about us was the same, except he had boy parts and my parts were, well, different.

But I was a boy just like him.

My parents didn't have a son and daughter as far as I knew and believed.

They-had-two-sons.

“Two spirits” is the term Native Americans used for men who wanted to live like women and women who wanted to live like men. Sometimes they were intersexed people. In most tribes, they weren't considered men or women. They had a distinct alternative gender status. Among the tribes, two spirits were considered to be lucky people who could bring good luck to others.

Me, bringing luck to someone...It's almost laughable.

In almost every culture in history people like me have existed. We've been on this earth for centuries. Just maybe then we didn't have a voice or a face. Now, the *millions* of us do.

When I take a right on East 23rd Street and linger at the corner my phone buzzes.

Eli: If you decided to take my advice, I'll be in my office all day.

Me: I'm kind of busy.

Eli: I had expected to find your first revised chapter in my inbox.

Me: Are you an editor now?

Eli: No, but I know what I'm doing. Do you?

Me: Beatrice broke up with me.

Eli: It'll help your writing.

My forehead furrows. I don't know why on earth I expect him to say “Poor, River.” Or, “I'm so sorry the love of your life dumped you.” I shake my head in disgust.

Me: What do you mean?

Eli: Broken hearts make the best teachers, River. Stop whining and put the fucking words on the page. By the time you finish your

second draft, we might be in the next millennium.

Me: I'll start tonight.

Eli: Which means you're already behind!

Me: I'll get started soon, I promise.

Eli: Your wasting your own time, not mine.

I stare at the message, scrutinizing his grammar but before I can point it out another message pops up.

Eli: I meant "you're."

Me: Yeah, sure you did.

Eli: If it's after six o'clock, I'll be at home reviewing more manuscripts. I always hope to find one potential out of the thousand sent to me each day.

Me: Fun. Fun. Fun.

Eli: Yeah, about as fun as waxing my balls.

Me: At least you have balls.

Eli: So do you, River.

With a sigh, I press my phone to my chest and look around. The streets are full of people. And regardless of what their surface appearances are, I wonder who they might be beneath.

You'd never know if someone is a transgender person just by looking at them.

The man who lives next door to you, who has the pretty wife and three perfect kids could feel like a woman inside. For all we know, he could be skating around their house in his wife's dresses and sexy lingerie and even wearing her makeup when she isn't at home.

Or the woman who wears the pretty dresses and makeup each day could feel like a man inside. She might love wearing her husband's work boots. Hell, she might even want a dick!

You'd never know.

Outside appearances do not determine how someone feels inside.

Not every transgender person makes the decision to transition like I have. If they choose not to, it doesn't change that they feel the same way inside as I do. As you can see the entire process is riddled with obstacles, such as the one last night...

To some, transitioning is just a step they don't wish to take.

Can you understand why?

They risk discrimination, ostracization and often even death.

It's much easier, sometimes even safer just to stay quiet and live in private grief that you must keep your *real* self hidden from the world.

I don't judge anyone's decisions.

We all have reasons for what we decide to do or don't do.

Often, I feel as though what I'm doing is just too risky.

I'd already lost my girlfriend...

The debilitating fear that lingers beneath my skin that I'd lose more people close to me never goes away, like a vicious rash. It's there. Constantly nudging me in the shoulder, telling me not everyone will understand what I'm going through, especially the people who are supposed to love me.

My family had a hard enough time accepting that I was dating a woman.

But *this*, I don't know.

Explaining to them I now plan to live my life as a man might just kill my father dead. And Adam might vaporize right on the spot. But that's probably after he tackles me to the ground and kicks the shit out of me.

Fear.

An unpleasant emotion caused by the belief that someone or something is dangerous, likely to cause *pain* or a threat. And it's eating me

alive as it always has.

But what's worse?

Living in fear or never being able to look at yourself in the mirror and *liking* what you see? I'd say the latter. I'm the only one who must be comfortable in my own skin.

So, I'm going there, down this rocky road, whether they like it or not, even if I must go it alone.

Because I won't beg for them to understand me.

But they will respect me.

THE WORLD TELLS YOU to be yourself, but they don't really mean it...

At least that's what I've always believed.

They're the right words but the meaning is something totally different. Because around the time I decided to "be myself" when I was at Jewish academy things only got worse for me.

I was teased horribly for being the girl who was too boyish. I was called everything from "butch" to "lezzo" to "tranny." It was awful. I think I still have fucking PTSD from that place. People didn't get me and by the time I was a teenager I didn't care to explain it anymore because I didn't understand it myself.

I wasn't a lesbian.

As I've said...

And I still do not consider myself to be a lesbian.

I no longer even see myself as a woman, not that I *really* ever have.

The letter in my hand signed by Doctor Beorsalve, who I've been seeing in secret for the past three years and who had exposed me to rigorous psychological evaluations, confirms that I am a *man*.

And now I'm here in this building to make it all official.

Pulling out my shitty manuscript, I turn to the second chapter and read aloud softly. "The boy approaches. His head hangs low. His shoulders slump as if he's had to carry the weight of the world on them like Atlas once had. His pupils are full of abandonment and his skin is sallow. I place my palm to his cheek and absorb the boy's sadness, making it my own, saving him. 'Can you help me?' he asks. With a nod, I smile. 'Of course. What good would I bring to this world if I couldn't help anyone? Especially you.'"

I continue reading, hoping to pass the time and funny enough, I see almost everything Eli had pointed out in this manuscript that could afford to either be scrapped altogether or changed slightly. With that realization, a smile touches my lips.

I shove the manuscript back in my bag. Leaning forward, I pluck up a magazine that's been left in the seat across from me.

A photograph of the bodybuilder Aydian Dowling on the front of it catches my attention. I thumb through the pages of the old magazine until I reach the section which highlights Transgender Awareness Week.

The timeline dates as far back as 1952 when Christine Jorgensen, who wasn't the first female to transition, brought awareness to trans issues. In 1972, Sweden legalized gender reassignment. In 1993, transgender youth Brandon Teena was brutally assaulted and murdered. The tragedy was later partly the inspiration for the Academy Award-winning film *Boys Don't Cry*. Then in 1993, U.S soldier Barry Winchell was murdered by another soldier when it was discovered he was in a relationship with a transgender woman.

"Christ," I mutter to myself when I'm reminded of the milestones, some tragic, which I already knew about. Some, I hadn't.

The article then goes on to highlight that the National Center for Gender Equality was founded in 2003 and the various employment protections in respect of pay and hiring that have been extended to transgender employees, thank God. I worried Barry might try and fire me if I showed up to work with a beard, but as it turns out *that* would be illegal.

I shut the magazine.

"Are you a transgender person?" The old man sitting next to me asks.

My head swings in his direction to find his face bright with a smile.

"I, uh, um, ah. Yes, I am."

He nods. "Ain't that somethin'."

My forehead wrinkles.

Using a handkerchief, he wipes his molasses-colored skin and gives me a long look. "My name is Marlon."

"It's nice to meet you, Marlon. My name is River."

"River," he says softly. "Like the Hudson."

I scrunch my face. “Yeah, I guess.”

Though it isn’t as beautiful as the Banyas, and instead of finding water lilies floating in it, you’d be discovering dead bodies, I suppose the Hudson River will do.

“Ever since you sat down, my heart started going boom, boom, boom in my chest, all fast and fluttery.”

I smile uncomfortably, keeping my laugh soft.

“I thought I’d met the woman of my dreams.” He stretches out his bony legs.

I give this guy who’s truly full of jokes today the side-eye.

He leans in, eyeballing me. “Then when I looked closer, I was even more *confused*.” His thick Southern accent is unmistakable. This old dude is no New Yorker.

I wait for him to say more.

“Then, I was like *nope*, that’s a boy!” Laughing, he slaps his hand on his thigh.

I’ve been running stealth for quite a while...

A woman waddles her way over to the empty seat next to the man and sits down.

“This is my wife Maggie, River.”

I wave to the woman. She lifts a hand back. The couple bicker about paperwork for a moment. Marlon sucks his teeth and gets back to keeping his eyes on me. Maggie cants forward and does the same.

“Maggie. Maggie. Maggie.” He taps the old woman on the arm.

“Yes, honey.” Her tone is bored and annoyed.

Their interactions are nothing short of hilarious.

They’re helping to ease the wait here and I’ve been here *forever*. In fact, everyone in this room has been waiting for so long they look as though

they've aged.

Marlon leans back so Maggie can get a good look at me. "Would you say she's a boy or a girl?"

Maggie squints, then takes off her glasses. "Honey, you're being really rude." She taps Marlon on the shoulder. "But, she ah, I don't know. I think she has that androg—Ugh. I can't remember the word. It's the same one they used to use for David Bowie. Do you remember him, honey?"

Marlon starts to sing "Fame" with the beat and *everything*.

I laugh out loud.

Maggie smiles. "Androgynous. That's the word. Like some of the movie stars now."

Marlon is still singing.

Maggie lifts a brow in my direction. "You're very beautiful if you're a girl. And you're very handsome if you're a boy. You have that interesting look." She winks. "You could be a supermodel."

"Thanks," I say softly.

She grins. "Maybe shake your booty in a rockin' pink dress and some five-inch heels."

Ah, no thanks. No dresses or heels for me.

Who does this woman think I am? Laverne Cox!

"Miss Roth." The woman behind the glass finally calls my name.

I gather up my documents and head for the counter.

The rather hefty woman behind the glass dips her chin to her chest, eyeballing me like I've just flown in from a far distant galaxy. Her thin glasses rest on the edge of her weak nose and I spot two coffee stains on her blouse she must've tried to clean off.

"Good morning, I'm here to change my sex on my birth certificate." I slide my documents under the glass partition, grateful it's the only thing I

must change. I thanked Abby and Benjamin a million times over in my head for giving me such a unisex name which makes people wonder if I'm a man or a woman before they meet me.

The woman stares at me blankly as if she didn't just hear what I said.

I blink a few times waiting for life to register in her features.

The tag on her blouse tells me her name is Faloona.

"Oh, I see," she says.

I smile a little, thinking that maybe my smile will infect her face and she'd catch it, but it doesn't happen. She just starts tapping away on her keyboard, giving me occasional glances. When she's finished typing, she reviews the letter I've given her which is signed by Doctor Beorsalve.

She grunts. "I thought maybe you were trying to change your sex to female."

"No, no, no," I say softly.

"It turns out you're trying to be a man."

Trying?

I am a man.

She gifts me with a cheap smile and for a beat I wonder if I'll have to pay Faloona a little extra to use a word on my birth certificate she clearly thinks she owns.

"Is everything in order?" I ask curiously.

"Yes, I think so."

"So, what do you do, just cross out 'female' and replace it with 'male' using your magic marker?"

She laughs a little at my joke. "That might cost you extra." She winks.

"I thought it would."

"I'll be right back," Faloona says.

“Yeah, hopefully with a new career,” I mumble, because being nice to fellow human beings just isn’t her strong suit. I think she’d make a better executioner.

Bye, Faloona!

My phone beeps with two missed calls. One is from Abby and the other is from Adam. It rings once more with a phone call from Adam. I let it go to voicemail.

Elevating my head, I find a different woman in front of me. A prettier one with soft features and kind eyes. With a smile, she slides my new birth certificate to me. “Here you go, *Mr.* River Peyton Roth.”

And for just a second, I don’t think any of this is real.

But fuck, it is!

I shoot up from my chair, taking the thick paper in my hands. I stare at the words on the certificate which is stamped with a red seal next to my full name and date of birth along with my parents’ names and my birthplace.

It reads: **MALE.**

My mood lifts so high I think I’m standing right in Heaven.

Behind the glass partition, a man lingers just off behind the woman, a scowl painted on his face and his arms folded across his chest. I already sense he doesn’t like me...

It seems my presence here has attracted an audience.

The woman next to him claps for a few seconds. *A friend.* I’m grateful.

“Thank you,” I say to the woman who’d just handed me the certificate. “Thank you so much.”

“You’re welcome.”

I wipe my wet cheeks and try not to completely breakdown in public.

But this feels monumental!

Who knew a simple word could mean so much to someone.

I cry for a little bit, hating that I am, and the woman behind the glass allows me to.

“Is there anything else we can help you with, Mr. Roth?”

Shaking my head, I’m slow to speak. “No, thank you. This was everything.”

She nods.

I stride in the direction of the exit, giving Marlon and Maggie a wave as I do. When I step outside the sun hits my cheeks and I don’t think I’ve ever felt so warm inside and so alive. I squeeze my eyes shut for a little while breathing in the salty air that drifts from the Hudson River which is only steps away from where I stand.

Well, blow me down!

The state of New York acknowledges that I am a man.

The question is: Will everyone else?

MY FATHER'S DEEP VOICE infiltrates my ears. "What happened to your hand?" He takes my palm in his, examining the tightly wrapped bandage which hides the surface cuts on it.

The wounds weren't deep and didn't require stitches, thank goodness. But, I'd inflicted enough damage to myself to make my hand sore enough that it hurt just to type. The word "bleed" writers so often use couldn't have rang truer whenever I sat in front of the keyboard to dump my guts out on the page.

The pain didn't stop me.

So far, I had rewritten almost four chapters of Raziel's Story. And I'd accomplished that by staying up late each night sucking back caffeine while Wiley kept radar eyes out the window and barked at every living thing which crossed our apartment.

Benjamin is still looking at me waiting for a response.

"Nothing, Dad." I sigh.

His dark brows knot as he fiddles with his yarmulke. "Are you sure, River?"

"Yes." I move out of his way as he reaches forward for the thick leather booklet in front of me. "It's nothing. I told you I had an accident. I'm okay, though."

Liar! Liar! Should I be surprised if my pants catch on fire?

Roth Jewelers had closed its doors for the day only an hour ago. The large store is quiet. And the air that's filled with the scent of green tea and lemongrass is cool, forcing goose bumps to appear all over my skin.

Benjamin keeps his head low, flipping through the pages, keeping his eyes on me through his thick black-framed glasses. He strokes his long beard that's gray in some spots, and those eyes stay on me, inspecting my face for any signs of dishonesty.

It's all here.

What he thinks he sees, he most definitely does.

He flips more pages.

I sidle up next to where he stands in front of the three-inch-thick glass showcase and put my arm around his shoulder, brushing my cheek against the soft cashmere of his sweater. He mumbles to himself as he goes through the book. Reaching out, I grab his payot and twirl them around my finger just the way I used to do when I was a girl. He doesn't stop me, just allows me to redo his long curl as he grumbles.

I almost fall asleep while doing it.

I find so much comfort in my father that the thought of losing him physically makes me feel like I'm about to die. He was never an unkind man but there were things I simply could never talk to him about. Period. Even now, he doesn't acknowledge that I ever had a girlfriend. Even now, he chooses to ignore the masculine qualities about me. And he would never for as long as he's alive believe that God made a mistake putting me in this body.

Benjamin would *never* hear of such things.

I respect him. So, we just don't talk about sensitive matters, especially ones I know we'd never agree on. But when I'm near him, just like I am now, I know he loves me so, so, so much.

It's one of the times when I feel the most embarrassment, shame and guilt that I'm not the daughter he probably ever imagined himself having one day.

My spirit sinks a little lower at his nearness, but I don't let it register on my face.

"How is work?" He kisses me on the temple.

"It's been okay."

Benjamin hums. "And the teaching?"

"Soon, Dad. I should have a job teaching soon."

His frown says it all even though he doesn't speak on it.

With a sharp inhale, I admire all the diamonds beneath the spotless glass. All varying cuts, sizes and colors set in every metal from silver and

yellow gold to platinum. Some pieces my father designed himself. They're exquisite and most of them are worth hundreds of thousands of dollars, some maybe more.

A smile dances across my lips when I think of the day when Adam's fiancé at the time, Chaya, came into Roth Jewelers. She practically tripped over her vagina at the sight of these diamonds. I thought she was going to mount Adam right where he stood that day. She'd come here to pick out her own engagement ring and band. A group of her girlfriends came along with her and they were nothing but giggles and ear-to-ear smiles as Chaya tried on almost every ring in the store before she picked out one.

Thinking back, I couldn't get over how annoying they were. Like silly school girls. And I just knew I had no interest. A diamond to me wasn't something I'd wear or want. In fact, it didn't rock my world at all. And at no point could I ever have considered buying such a stone for a woman or a woman buying something like it for me.

To me, it was all meaningless, *expensive* bullshit.

"Eli came by here a few days ago." Benjamin scribbles some notes down with his pen. "He looks good, considering everything."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, he hasn't been getting along with his father at all."

I chew on my bottom lip, thinking for a second, recalling that Eli had mentioned no such thing about not getting along with his family. But then again. Why would he? He isn't the type of person to moan and groan about everything going wrong in his life.

Only *I* do that.

"Why?" I wait for Benjamin to respond.

He lifts a shoulder. "I don't know. I only know he hasn't."

"Oh."

"We talked for a little bit. With that big, fancy job he has, I figure he must be doing well." He stops to look at me. "Along with the hundred-

thousand-dollar watch on his wrist.” Benjamin has committed to writing again.

I smile a little. “I’ve been in contact with him.”

Benjamin nods.

“He’s just the same.”

A laugh rattles his chest. “Yes, he told me you’re writing a book.”

“He told you that?” I snap.

Benjamin nods twice.

“I’ve actually *written* a book.”

He hums in response. “He told me you’re *writing* a book.” He places the pen down for a second. “Well, you will have to explain the difference to me, River, because I don’t know the difference. Written. Writing. Having written. Going to write. It’s all the same to me.”

“Okay, yes, Dad, I’m writing a book,” I confirm.

“Why haven’t you told me about it?”

“I don’t know, Dad. It isn’t a book you’d want to read.”

Or probably anyone who has better things to do with their time.

“How do you know that? I read all the time.” His brown-eyed gaze is soft when it lands on me. He genuinely looks offended at my presumption. “What is it about, River?”

“It’s just a silly story, Dad. It’s nothing you’d be interested in. I promise you.”

The last thing I want is Benjamin reading my science fiction dystopian story and all the erotic sex scenes in it. If the book were one of “literary” quality—the type of stories Eli normally shops to publishers, I’d maybe consider it. But this book, Benjamin, *cannot* read.

“Okay, River.” I press a kiss to his cheek and wander off and into his office. Once inside, I find a spot in one of the leather chairs, letting it swing

from left to right.

I've had my new birth certificate for a while. For weeks, in fact. Resting on the kitchen counter where I'd placed it the day I received it, it's a constant reminder that my life is changing. That I'm changing. I wished then I could show it to the world, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. Not yet.

All the photographs which decorate the walls in Benjamin's office chronicle our lives together. In a few, I'm a baby. In others I'm around five years old and Adam is six. We're pulled tight together in a hug. His lips are pressed against my cheek and we're both wearing cheesy grins. In another, I'm a teenager looking as awkward and ugly as ever, wearing a baggy Tommy Hilfiger sweatshirt and jeans with my long dark hair out all over the place. In the photograph resting on the edge of Benjamin's desk are all four of us during last Hanukkah. We're all smiles as we sit around the dinner table.

I shut my eyes for a few minutes then find myself drifting off to sleep.

~

"Wake up, fuckhead." A shoe kicks me in the ankle.

My eyes flutter open and with a breath, I massage my neck.

Adam is hunched over in front of me, peering down into my face with his brown eyes. "I didn't think you'd show up." He whacks me in the head.

I knock his hand away.

He sits on the edge of the desk and observes me.

"I told you I'd come by."

His eyes narrow. "You look different."

"I don't," I growl, sitting up straighter in the chair.

"You do." He leans in and then hits me in the head once more.

We scuffle for a few seconds. He pulls my hair from its elastic. In the mayhem, I knock his yarmulke off and soon we're on the floor. Panting.

Groping. Grunting. My heart jackhammers in my chest and I'm covered in sweat. As much as I protest, Adam overpowers me, as usual. He's bigger. He's stronger. He always wins. I attempt to hide the agony I'm in when he lands two hard rights to my rib cage and then gets me in a head lock, constricting my windpipe with his forearm. I squirm beneath his heavy weight and dig my fingers into his arm, tempted to bite it. When he doesn't let go, I sink my teeth in.

"You fucking asshole." He spits in my ear.

"ENOUGH!" Benjamin's voice booms when he appears in the doorway.

In less than a split second, Adam releases me and helps me up from the floor, practically lifting me to my feet. His crisp white dress shirt is mangled, and his dark hair is a mess.

Benjamin stands stunned, his hands by his side, his back hunched a bit from his old age and an unimpressed scowl painted across his face. It's the way he always looks when he puts a stop to Adam and me skylarking.

"This is NOT a wrestling ring," Benjamin scolds.

"We were just playing around, Dad." Adam grins.

"You shouldn't fight with your sister that way."

Twenty years too late, Dad.

Adam laughs a little and tips his head in my direction. "She's okay. She can take it. Always has been able to."

I force a smile, keeping my frustrated tears back, still struggling to breathe.

"Yeah, Dad. I'm fine."

"Adam, I need you out here. We need to go over the books."
Benjamin walks off.

When he's gone, Adam's heavy hand lands on my shoulder. "You're okay, aren't you, River?" He laughs some more and pulls me in for a rough hug, giving me a noogie, then pushes me away once more to peer into my

face, feigning regret at his actions that will happen again. They always do. “You’re okay, River.” He nods a few times.

“Yeah, I’m okay.”

Am I, really?

Looking around for my elastic, I fix my hair and gather my shit.

“I haven’t seen you in so long, I’m sorry. I guess I got a little excited to see my little sister.” He goes on. “It seems like everyone is avoiding me these days. Eli finally stopped to the house a few days ago.”

“Oh.” I wipe the blood from my bottom lip.

“Yeah, he’s been acting fucking weird too.” Adam scoffs. “Everybody’s acting like assholes.”

Yeah, everyone besides you...I keep my sarcasm on lockdown.

“He’s supposed to be my best friend. I don’t know what’s up with him. He barely hangs out anymore. I mean not like he really used to anyways. He doesn’t drink much anymore. He’s always busy with work. None of the guys have really seen him in months. He has no fucking time for anyone. I know he isn’t the most sociable person, but shit is getting really ridiculous.”

I absorb his words.

“Yeah, I don’t know what the fuck is going on with him.” He curls his payot making them look as presentable as possible again and fixes his shirt. “When are you coming to see Ariel and Nathan?”

I haven’t seen my twin nephews in a while. Not since they both turned eight years old. I don’t feel comfortable around them. I worry they’ll notice I look different. Or that I seem different and would start asking me a shit-ton of questions I won’t know how to answer. But I love those two boys and their wild souls, eager spirits and mops of curly ebony hair. They’re more like their mother than they are like the asshole standing in front of me. They possess the patience, understanding and acceptance I wish most adults would. But, after all they’re innocent children. Not the judgey adults I’m usually surrounded by.

“Soon,” I lie. “I’ve just been kind of busy.”

Adam steps closer. His stance isn’t threatening but the heat from him is. “With that girlfriend of yours?”

“We broke up,” I snap. *And I miss her badly...*

He runs a hand over his thick beard. “Good.”

I stare at the stone floor at my feet.

“You have so many options, River.”

I lift a brow. “What do you mean?”

“I mean marriage, kids. The normal shit people do.”

“And who on earth would marry me, Adam?” My laugh is short before I swallow it back.

He shrugs. “Plenty of guys, River.”

Adam lies so easily, just as easily as I do. Maybe it’s hereditary...

“I don’t want to be married, Adam.” Marching across the room, I snatch up my bag.

He rubs his hands together. “Well, that’s what normal people do, River. They grow up. They get real jobs. They get married and they have kids. I’ve told that cunt Eli the same thing. I still don’t understand how he could let that pretty wife of his go.” He squeezes his eyes shut. “Not even married a year.”

My heartbeat is in my bottom lip. “Some people don’t want to be married, Adam.”

He stays silent as he observes me. “You definitely look different, River.”

“I don’t.”

He nods a few times. “Yeah, yes you do. I can’t quite put my finger on it.” He shakes his stupid cranium some more. “Anyways, I have a friend, Jacob, real nice guy looking for a wife.”

“Adam.” I hold up a hand.

“Just meet him, River.”

“I’m not interested.” I head for the door.

“What, in men you mean, anymore?” The venom on his tongue is unmistakable.

“What’s it to you?”

“This isn’t the way, River. This isn’t what we were taught. You know this. You know how I feel. And you’ve always been so fucking *confused*. Men. Women. I suppose if they had a sex in between you’d be into that too.”

I spin around to face him. “Oh, fuck you.”

He stands tall, broad chest and tight jaw, unaffected by my two special words. “Mom and Dad are always making excuses for everything you do. Always letting your crap slide but not me, River. I never have, and I never will.”

“You’re supposed to *support* me, Adam.”

My family.

My heart.

The first people the ICU would call on if I ever needed more blood.

This man stands in front of me in love with me out of obligation, but he resents me for who I am. Always has. Since we were little kids I’ve always wondered how deep Adam’s disdain goes for me. He loves me, yes. But he hates me too.

And it’s never reared its ugly head more than it had once over the summer when I was nine years old. That day, in our grandparents’ pool, Adam had been so rough, and I swallowed so much water, I swore he was attempting to drown me rather than teaching me how to swim as he’d promised. But I lived.

These days, whenever I’m in his presence, all his compliments come out feeling more like salt to my freshly-shaven skin.

You must know people like that...

Don't you?

The ones who *try* to hide their venom for you. Their compliments sound sweet but lurking deep behind them is hatred. Then in the same breath they gift you with a bullshit smile.

Yep, that's Adam Roth.

But, Adam reserves that behavior for special days when he's feeling more bastardly than usual.

He looks stunned, like someone just told him I'm a man. "I do. Believe me, I do support you, River. But at some point, all the nonsense you do has to stop."

Nonsense I do?

I take a few more steps toward the exit.

"I want you to stop *embarrassing* this family." He's completely serious.

Embarrassment.

Freak.

Maniac.

It's only a few of the names this twisted asshole has called me over the years.

My eyes narrow when they find his face, but I can't say anything. I'm speechless as usual in every single confrontation with Adam.

He tosses his hands up in the air. "Pick a team, River!"

Fuckkkkk.

You.

"You can't have it all!" His face is fierce.

It's almost as if a nuclear blast has gone off inside me and I debate for

around five seconds about if I want to go all Patrick Bateman on him. This man knows nothing about me, the people whom I love or my sexual preferences. Everything Adam thinks about me are his own misinformed assumptions. His life is dictated by a book that is believed to have been dropped down from the sky by God and given to the people to follow. Its contents advise us on how to live our lives according to The Rules. Yet, it seems as though every word about *tolerance* in the damn thing gets ignored.

What about human decency?

What about compassion and understanding and *kindness*?

What about minding your own damn business?

The man standing in front of me is religious, yes, but he's about as spiritual as Attila the Hun was on a good day.

"Fuck you, Adam."

"Yeah, yeah. I'll remember that at the end of the month when I have to cut a check for your rent because you don't have a real fucking job."

"It's *Dad's* money, not yours."

"Get a decent job, River!"

I toss him the finger and leave.

CHAPTER SIX

I ALWAYS THOUGHT IT was odd to remember the way someone smelled.

Usually, I don't, and I haven't ever since. But the second I made it here and stepped past the large oak door, I breathed it in again and all the memories that came along with it.

I feel totally shit.

After leaving Benjamin and Adam at Roth Jewelers I took the subway uptown. I spent a half hour walking the streets aimlessly debating if I'd come here, and then I just did. Honestly, I had nowhere else to go. I suppose I could've just headed home and sat around on the sofa with Wiley or out on the stoop talking nonsense with Tosh, but I didn't want that sort of company.

I wanted to be someplace I felt I belonged.

And I always feel safe wherever Eli is.

I'm standing in his swanky penthouse apartment in my socks. I wiggle my toes and admire the chestnut wood flooring beneath my feet. The walls are cream. The ceilings are insanely high, and all the furnishings are understated—a combination of oak, mahogany and leather. All four walls in this den are lined with shelves eight feet high which are filled with books.

Honestly, if I didn't know Eli lives here and didn't *smell* him I would've assumed this place is occupied by a senior citizen, likely a man, who lives alone and loves to read.

A tiny giggle hits me.

I should keep that thought to myself.

There's certainly no indication that a woman ever lived in this apartment.

The only pop of color in here is from a painting which hangs on the far wall. It must be a replica because I've seen the original hanging at The Met on the fifth floor. It's Andrew Wyeth's *Christina's World*. So thought

provoking and simplistic. Yet, it speaks volumes about I don't know the fuck what. I keep my eyes on it for just a minute appreciating the colors.

Spinning around, I face the floor-to-ceiling windows ahead of me and the evening view of Central Park. My forehead hits the glass with a clunk when I lean forward and drink in the sight of the endless canopies of trees, the people and all the greenery beyond.

Serenity hits me when I breathe once more and shut my eyes. When I open them, they burn with the tears I've been holding in my eyes for what feels like a century. I close them once more appreciating the peace just standing here offers.

Eli had disappeared a few minutes ago to take a phone call.

The echo of his voice bounces down the hallway faintly, but I can't make out what he's saying. At first it sounded as if he was having a disagreement with the person on the other end of the line. Then his tone mellowed into a simple conversation.

The door far away from where I stand clicks.

Running my fingers over all the books on the shelf, I examine the titles. The classics. I guess I should've expected to find these. Then, I find Shakespeare. I trace my fingers over their spines. The shelf in front of me holds travel books and photo albums. And when I get to the very end, just beneath it on a small table, I find a record player.

I smile at the sight of it since Benjamin used to have one. He didn't play music often but when he did, he played jazz. Anything jazz.

I snatch up the glass of scotch Eli had given me when I first arrived and take a sip. It hits me instantly and calms those tiny receptors in my brain that have been in overdrive all morning. It burns as it moves down my throat when I knock back the rest of it and set the glass down on the table, watching the two cubes of ice battle each other in the bottom of it.

I clear my throat, almost choking from the blaze in my chest.

Soft laughter causes me to spin around.

"It'll put some hair on your chest." Eli marches toward me.

I press my lips together fighting back a smile.

He drops the five chapters I'd given him to review on the coffee table. At the sight of it, my spine compresses a little more. He pins me with his glowing eyes and I know he's finding it massively amusing that he's making me wait.

My eyes skate over the simple white T-shirt he's wearing, along with gray sweatpants and down to his bare feet. He runs his fingers through his hair, then marches over to the iPod dock. With a click, "Tomorrow" by Daughter plays softly.

"Music," I say.

He only nods and tidies up a little bit around the apartment. There are books and stacks of papers *everywhere*. Next to the fireplace are three separate piles of what I think are manuscripts. The loose pages of each one are held together by a large elastic band.

No professional binding?

My eyes narrow.

"It's supposed to be my day off." He extends his arm toward me. "You should be grateful I'm making time to see you."

I take a deep breath.

"I'm really busy, River, but—"

"I can go, Eli."

He stands straight and spins around to face me. "No, absolutely not. You're halfway through this thing. I think we should talk about it, River. Don't you?"

No.

I manage a tiny nod, keeping my eyes on the floor.

"I didn't think you'd be able to fix it." He laughs.

I wait for him to say more.

He plucks up the stack of pages I sent him and shakes them. “But, as I started reading it, I was convinced you could. It’s a different voice. Almost as if it’s been written by a different person.”

I shrug. “I’ve stayed up most nights working on it. I suppose the midnight hours bring something out of me I didn’t know I had.” I wander around the room a bit more, touching stuff, admiring all the items in here which belong to him. Some, such as the old leather baseball glove with his name scratched into it, I recognize from when we were younger. He’s had it all these years. And judging by the books, the sci-fi framed posters and all the New York Yankees memorabilia, this man has never tossed one thing away.

He watches me carefully as I fiddle with his stuff in this uber-masculine apartment. On the coffee table, open with a bookmark resting on top and next to his black-framed reading glasses and a bottle of sparkling water is *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy.

I purse my lips.

I’ve seen the movie. Never read the book.

Not exactly what I’d imagine Eli reading but it had won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction about a year after it was written. The *ultimate* validation for any writer.

Eli represents the most recent Pulitzer Prize-winning author which only adds to his growing list of talented clients. I’m not sure why he’s bothering to help nurse my manuscript back to health or offer me up any of his precious time at all.

I run my fingers over a baby picture of him, tapping on the frame, almost forgetting he’s standing a few feet away from me.

He clears his throat, earning my attention. “I get asked all the time what’s the key to writing.”

I smile. “I’ve never wondered,” I lie.

“Well, it’s as simple as sitting in front of the keyboard and putting yourself in someone else’s shoes, writing as though you lived it, so to say. And writing without fear as though no one is ever going to read it is

important.” He rubs his jaw. “Because most bad writing comes from fear.”

“You think?” I’ve moved over to another bookshelf.

“Yes.” His response is terse.

“You can learn everything about writing, River, to get better.”

“I suppose.”

“It’s like the marriage of two people who need to be in perfect harmony and contribute equally to make things work.” His thoughts wander for a moment. “I suppose you could always just get a ghostwriter but that’s another matter.” He tips his head in my direction. “But we’re talking about *you*, the writer, getting this done on your own, putting the words on the page.”

“Yes, of course.”

“Well, if you don’t have the imagination for the story even if you *can* write, you’ll still have no book. And if you have a book but the writing is shit, you just have a *bad* novel. Which would you rather?” He smirks.

“I’d rather have the story.”

He points at me. “That’s what I would’ve said.”

I make a face. “*Really?*”

“Yes.” He doesn’t elaborate.

I walk around the large room, poking with things, observing my surroundings. The pungent aroma of seafood wafts into the den from the kitchen down the hallway. This apartment feels warm and safe, like the shelter from a winter storm. An imaginary hug, reminding me I’ll be okay today even if just for a few more hours before I go back to my personal hell.

“The relationship that Raziel has with Hajile in the story, you went deeper.”

“I guess,” I whisper, picking up a snow globe with the word “Jamaica” written on the front of it in the shape of palm leaves. I shake it around. Fascinated, I watch the snow float to the bottom of it, then set it back

down.

“Their interactions in the first draft were prickly. In some chapters, I thought they were even downright hateful considering how long in the story it was indicated they’d known each other.”

I nod.

He blinks a few times. “I’m glad you showed a softer side of him.”

“I felt I had to.” I avoid his eyes and move around the space some more. In a corner of the room on the floor is a stack of romance novels, tossed off and out of sight as though the presence of them in this mini library taints its snobby collection of books.

“Yes.”

“Is Raziel in love with him?”

I lift a shoulder. “I haven’t quite decided yet. She’s in love with the woman.”

He chuckles. “It comes off the pages, River. It practically smacks you in the face how much in love with Hajile she is. Maybe you don’t realize what you’ve written. Maybe you as the writer can’t even comprehend the emotion you’ve poured into Raziel. And how much of those emotions are reserved *only* for Hajile.”

“I don’t know.”

He laughs a little. “I don’t think you do, River.”

“What are you saying?”

“Nothing, nothing. I just think you might confuse the reader. The story is about Raziel and the woman whom she’s in love with. But it’s clear she’s in love with Hajile too.”

“Maybe I want the readers to be confused when they finish the story.” I spin around to find him looking at me as though I need a serious psych eval.

His face twists into some sort of weird expression. “Is that what you want?”

“Sometimes, I suppose. I think I’d be doing the reader an injustice if I lead them down the path of human emotion *I* want them to take. I guess I prefer to nudge them a bit and leave them in a really complicated, weird spot so they can decide for themselves what they feel or what they *want* to feel.”

With the lift of a thick brow, he cocks his head to the side. “You enjoy fucking with people’s minds?”

“No less than I enjoy fucking with my own.”

He smiles. “People like to think that when they read a book it allows them the chance to get into the writer’s head.”

I shake my head from side to side vigorously. “I don’t think that’s true. If someone decides to spend time reading my words, I like to think they’re giving me the chance to get into *their* heads.” It’s the most honest thing I’ve said all day. “But, what do I know? I’ve only written one shitty book.”

“I think you can write more, River. I truly do.”

“So almost overnight I go from being total crap to showing *promise*?”

He gifts me with a bright white smile. “See what a little criticism can do.”

“Not really.”

“Ah, sure you can.” His expression is gentle. “It can be a pick-me-up, makes you pay attention, encourages you to do your best and not put out mediocre garbage.”

“I suppose, literary snob.”

He doesn’t fight me on my statement, only moves closer to where I now stand, next to the big windows I’d been lingering in front of when I first arrived here. The view brings nothing but deep peace, considering my mood is somber and my demeanor is sketchy in the emotional department.

“You were looking at the painting on the wall.” When I lift my head to face him, his eyes are bright and playful. “It’s my favorite.” He walks over to it encouraging me to follow.

“Yeah.” I drag my fingers along my arm. “I’ve seen it before in The Met.”

He nods.

We stand beneath the recess lighting in front of the large vivid picture of a woman lying in an endless field, looking in the direction of an old house that’s far off on the horizon. Her pink dress against the dry tawny grass presents an interesting contrast of colors. And I can’t help but wonder why on earth she’s lying in the grass in such a pretty dress.

I laugh softly.

Eli’s head swings toward me. “What?”

I wave my hand, brushing off his question. “Nothing.”

“Come on, River. Cough it up.”

“It’s just that, um, she looks out of place.”

With an encouraging hum to continue, he drags his fingers through his hair.

I don’t say anything more.

He slow-blinks. “It’s my favorite painting.”

I point to the odd masterpiece. “*This?*”

He nods. “Yes, *this*.” He dips out of my view for a second. Then he’s close to me. His chest brushes my back. His warm, scotch-laced breaths on my neck and the familiar scent of his skin tickles my nostrils. “It always reminded me of you.”

I freeze completely. “What do you mean?”

He lifts an arm and points toward the painting of the woman. “I know my interpretation as well as yours will be different from what Wyeth intended for the painting to represent. The entire scene looks hopeless...But, I think you’re right that she’s out of place.”

“She is.”

“Lost.”

“She is.”

“Alone.”

“She is.”

The air that leaves him is heavy with something. I don’t know what.

My eyes stay on the colorful canvas ahead.

“I wrote a story once. It’s an old one out of the many I’ve written.”
His warm breaths puff against my skin.

I move to face him but he stills me with his palm on the nape of my neck.

“Yes, I write too.” He chuckles. “How do you think I can give you the advice I have so far?”

“I don’t know. I’m sorry, I didn’t realize it.”

Ben Howard’s “The End of the Affair” fills the heavy silence.

“I don’t tell anyone, River. I’ve only just told you. I’ve never published anything. I write for myself mostly.”

I close my eyes. “Tell me about the story.”

He huffs. “Well, it’s about a boy who once knew this girl. The girl had always thought she was odd. She always felt out of place. She never had many friends. And all throughout their school years, she was teased mercilessly. Called all sorts of horrible names. The boy had even gotten into a few fights when others had called her anything besides her birthname. Anyways, the boy was her only friend.”

I breathe.

“The girl in the story had so many secrets.” He sighs.

I wipe my face with a shaky hand.

“They never grew apart *really*, but they did in space and time.”

He takes a long break before he speaks again. “And although he’d always loved her, it took the boy who’d become a man many, many years to realize exactly *how* much he loved her.” He laughs softly. “He was so in love with her.”

“Why did it take him so long?”

I feel his shrug. “He was trying to sort himself out, I guess you could say.”

“Oh.”

“But there’s a catch.”

“What kind of catch?”

“Well, the boy and the girl in the story were more alike than they realized or dared to admit to each other.” He massages the back of my neck, rubbing all the horror away. And God does it feel good. “They both felt alone and misunderstood. They both needed each other.”

I feel him all around me. His desire. My want to be touched. The need.

But it can’t happen.

Not right now.

Why is he doing this now!

I squeeze my eyes shut.

I can’t.

I-just-can’t.

There’s too much to explain.

He’s searching for the old me and...

I will my mouth to open and say something, but any words that leave it will only make things worse. I am not that girl anymore. I’ll never be her again. I don’t want to be *her* anymore!

She
is
gone.
“Eli.”

“The boy in the story learned something as he got older. Something he had hoped the girl had learned too, but she never did.” He places his hand on my head like he always used to. Tenderly. Lovingly. Adoringly. “The boy learned to stop seeking approval from others. *Validation*. He hated the fuck out of it.” He laughs a little. “He learned to stop trying to make them understand because often they simply never will. Nor, do they want to.” He clutches my hand in his. “Anyways, he discovered that instead of constantly seeking love from others, that the trick, you see, is to simply *love yourself*.” He brings my hand to his mouth and presses his lips to the back of it.

I choke down a sob that’ll flood this apartment with my tears if I let it loose.

“Who gives a fuck what they think.” He runs his hand over my hair.

Warm. Strong. *Home*.

He edges closer and wraps his arm around my midsection. I slump into his chest and allow him to hold me. We rock from side to side. Turning my head to the side a little, I bury my face into the soft cotton of the T-shirt he’s wearing.

Truly, I don’t think I can take anymore crap today.

No more rejection.

No more criticism.

No more *hate*.

My soul is in danger of completely shattering.

Hold on just a little longer, River.

“There’s one more thing.” His lips are near my ear.

“What?”

“In the story, the boy, their entire lives...he always considered the girl...”

“What? Tell me. I want to know.”

“He always considered the girl to be a *boy*.”

The tears are already sprinting down my cheeks and my hands are shaking.

“He *always* accepted her.” He buries his nose in my hair, inhaling me.

I hold his hand tighter for just a second before I let go again and twist around to face him.

“But it’s just a stupid story.” His fingers graze my cheek.

Oh. I stare at him, perplexed.

His eyes crinkle at the sides when he smiles. “A bit of romantic fiction purely for your entertainment.” His laugh is dry. “It’s nothing I’d ever publish. It’s too special to me to share it with the world.”

“I should go, Eli. I can come back tomorrow.” Wriggling out of his hold, I take a few steps toward the foyer for my boots.

With a few slow strides, he follows. I keep my head low and my gaze on his feet.

He says nothing.

Neither do I.

I swallow down a tiny gasp trying to get a handle on my shit, but I can’t stop my stupid tears. “I’ll come back tomorrow, Eli.”

An exhale leaves him.

More tears slick my hot cheeks.

He reaches for me. Instantly, my steel-plated armor is on for whatever joke or snide remark I’m assured he’ll make.

“Eli.”

He takes my hand in his larger, warmer one. The other cups my cheek—the one Adam’s hand had connected with earlier—as delicately as someone would handle a wilting flower or a dying kitten. Tender. Sweet. “Please don’t cry, River Blue.” His wish comes out in a whisper. “Tell me what’s wrong.”

With the moniker I thought he’d long ago forgotten, I find the courage to face him, snotty nose and all. “I should go.” I find confusion in his eyes, concern and something else.

Lust?

Pain?

Annoyance?

He dips down to peer into my face with a look sketched across his beautiful features as if one word from my mouth would make him reach into his chest and stop his own heart.

He’s never looked at me like *this*.

He wipes my tears. “You look different, River Blue. You are a little different.”

I nod, weak and utterly terrified.

“Aren’t you?” His brows are knotted as his thumb skims my cheek.

“Yes.”

“What have you been up to, River Blue?”

I sink into the sight of his big green orbs which beg me for so much. I don’t know if I can say the words. Tell the truth. I’m too used to lying! Pretending. Bullshitting.

“I can’t.” My words are a plea that he’ll let me run and hide.

He wipes the snot from my face using his hand, not caring that right now I’m just one big fucking mess standing in front of him. Begging,

praying, wishing, wanting, *hoping* someone will care.

“Tell me, River Blue.” He presses his lips to my top one.

My lips part tentatively, trembling at the sensation of the stubble around his mouth crashing with my own. He presses his body against mine and I can't help the squeak which leaves my mouth that gets swallowed up in this kiss. I can't breathe. I can't move. His hands are everywhere and in the last six seconds I'm reminded of everything I miss about this man.

I sink into the kiss. My fingers thread through his hair feeling the soft strands.

Sweet. Rough. Eli.

His tongue delves deeper into my mouth and his hand finds the seam of my shirt.

My heart sputters. It skips. It pounds. It threatens to completely break the fuck down.

The kiss halts for a split second and then his mouth is on mine again. Hot. Wet. And I'm even more drunk from the taste of scotch on his tongue. His big hand slides up my shirt. He presses his forehead to mine, stilling us, peering into me with his beautiful eyes. With fluttering lashes, he swipes the tip of his nose across the bridge of mine.

I tremble as his thick fingers crawl along my flesh. They tease my belly button and then they move up, up, up, tickling my skin.

He keeps his eyes on me.

I'm pinned.

Controlled.

We're silently having a conversation we should be having aloud!

But I can't get the words out. My God, I can't. I can't explain.

I suck his top lip into mine and then pretty much attack his mouth, taking everything he's offering up on this exceptionally large, dirty plate. And I want it, I do, but...

His pupils have dilated. His hard body shudders against mine, giving away how desperate he is for this. But I don't think he wants *this*!

You should never have come here, River!

He shuts his big absinthe-colored orbs, allowing me the view of his long, dark lashes as they rest against the tops of his pale cheeks. I absorb *everything*. His taste. His touch. His smell. Everything that never left my memory. It's as if we've been blasted right back to thirteen years ago in that tiny closet.

When his hand splays against my stomach I almost melt into the wall behind me.

"River, River, River." He presses his forehead to mine.

A tear scurries down my cheek.

He nudges me harder into the wall forcing me to look at him.

And oh, what a beautiful face it is!

The soft cotton that used to cover my skin is gone, tossed to the floor like a filthy useless rag. His eyes don't move. I-don't-move.

I'm exposed!

To judgments. To disgust. To ridicule.

"Eli." My voice quavers.

The sharp sensation of fear mixed in with lust has me dizzy and confused. I keep my eyes fixed on every muscle in his face when his gaze lowers. He looks back up. We lock eyes for what feels like an entire minute.

I keep my eyes on him. "Aren't you going to say something?" It's such a stupid question.

"No," he pants out, yanking me from against the wall by the waistband of my jeans when his fingers curl around them.

I brush my messy hair out of my eyes and step out of my jeans when he helps me take them off. I don't bother to remove my plaid socks. He strips

out of his shirt, showing me his gorgeous chest—defined pecs, washboard abs and a light smattering of hair—like mine—that trails a path down his midsection and disappears into his sweatpants.

With a heaving chest, he steps toward me, pinning me to the wall once more.

I can't keep my hands to myself!

After I manage to undo the string in his sweatpants they fall down his muscular thighs. He steps back a little, composing himself. I still for a moment, beholding the sight in front of me and trying not to fall to my knees in worship like I've just been introduced to the fucking Mashiach.

I lick my lips.

A monster.

A beast.

Nine inches of thick, veiny flesh dripping with precum at the tip.

All my life I've wanted one of these things.

It hangs there like it has a life of its own.

Ready.

Wanting.

Furious.

Instead of the smirk I expect to see on Eli's face, I'm gifted with the fiercest expression. His brows are bent. His beautiful mouth hangs open. Even at his horniest and disheveled, he looks fucking gorgeous.

He lunges for me like a savage. I jump so far back, that my breath leaves me when I'm plastered against the wall. It happens so fast. So quick. And before I know it, he's inside of me, stretching me out, filling my pussy with his heat. He's grunting, groaning, moaning and I'm doing the same.

I plant my hand against the wall in front of me but it's no use.

The fucking becomes relentless.

Messy.

Raw.

Eager.

This sophisticated literary man is an animal!

His sweat covers the skin on my back and soon I'm soaked in it. It mixes with mine and I smell it all—the pure scent of men.

“Is this what you want, River Blue?”

“Yes.”

“Good, because I have more to give than this. A lot more.”

My forehead brushes the wall in front of me each time I'm vaulted forward. I'm helpless in his grip, only able to take what he's giving me. With every stroke, I'm sent further and further up on my tippy toes taking him all in.

I don't hold back my sounds. I moan each time the head of his cock parts my walls, leaving me marked, bruised, wanting. This is the most freedom I've felt in a while.

He says nothing about the light dusting of hair which covers my legs. He says nothing about my scars where my breasts *used* to be or the fact they're now gone. He just fucks me, *hard*.

The orgasm that clutches me is powerful. As steadfast as this man's hold on me is. It's committed to robbing me of the breath in my lungs, my heartbeat and the sound of my own voice. He comes right along with me. A guttural groan leaves him as he fills my pussy with his cum.

Clutching my chin, he presses a soft kiss to my lips.

I don't know what to say. Or what to do. *Do I even know where I am?*

When he pulls out, I wince at the absence of him, desperate to have him inside me again. Only his breaths fill my ears and the thundering of my heartbeat. His dick drags along the crack of my ass. Then it dips in my wetness over and over.

Eli groans.

The head of his cock lingers at the tight pucker of my asshole.

I flinch.

But this time for another reason.

When he nudges me forward, it obliges, happy to see him like a fucking welcome mat! I rock forward, avoiding it, slightly in protest and fear.

The growl that leaves him skitters its way through me and lands between my thighs. Each time he moans, the sounds hypnotize me. They make me forget *everything!*

He dips down and kisses my shoulder. “I won’t hurt you, River Blue.”

I bite my lip when his cock begs once more. It *pleads*.

My asshole opens.

With the slap of my good hand against the stone wall, I gasp.

His powerful arm curls around my midsection so I don’t fall over on my face. “Do you hear me?” His tone is gruff and comes out on the back end of a moan.

Reaching down, I rub my clit that has more than tripled in size recently, I swear it. Blame it on all the T I’ve been shooting up. The apprehension flowing through me eases and pleasure surges through me from my neck to my knees.

He moans. “I won’t hurt you, I promise.”

I nod rapidly and let my head hang low, bracing myself.

“Think of it as a rebirth, River.”

A sigh leaves my mouth when the thick head of his cock nudges me to open even *wider*. A shrill sound fills the air from me as I nearly eat my bottom lip. Then he’s in, buried deep inside of me, hissing, groaning and making himself more comfortable as if he plans to be there for a *while*. And when he does find his stroke, I lose it.

It's hard to believe all I came here for was a frickin' manuscript critique. Turns out, I'm here to lose my virginity...again!

~

"You haven't told anyone." Eli drags his fingers over the contour of my chest, where the scars are still healing and then over my newly positioned nipples.

"No." I wrap myself further in the soft sheets, trying my best not to look at him.

He reaches out and tips my chin up to face him. "You could have told me."

I suck in a breath. "I couldn't tell anyone, Eli. I tried—" I shake my head.

"What?"

"Nothing, Eli. I just couldn't tell anyone, okay."

He lifts his hands in surrender. "Okay, River, but we've never been like that—you and me. We've always just been ourselves together. And to be honest, I *miss* this."

A morsel about how he truly feels...

Thanks.

"I miss having this with you—just hanging out, fucking, all of it."

"I'm different."

"Yeah." He laughs. "I can see that."

I breathe out.

"Why don't you tell me the truth about what happened to your hand?"

"I did," I lie.

The way his skeptical brows knot tells me he knows that's total horseshit, but he doesn't press, only takes it in his hand gently.

Except for the muffled sounds of the city, it's quiet in this large bedroom that's barely furnished, except for a bed and a dresser across the room and the open drapes which cover the large windows in here. A tiny lamp in the corner of the room emits a soft light.

Eli lies naked alongside me, relaxed with one knee up.

"Have you ever been to Tel Aviv?" I turn to look at him.

"Yes, many times."

"I've never been to Israel." I say something he already knows. "I want to go. I've been told by many Jewish friends that it's LGBTQ friendly. A friend of mine, well, she's a coworker really...Her name is Blythe, but she's planning to go to Tel Aviv at the end of this summer. Something about husband hunting." I laugh. "She said people are out in the open about their sexuality there as they are here."

Eli nods. "It's true."

In recent years, numerous LGBTQ-friendly synagogues had popped up all over New York City like pure blessings. They'd become places where liberal Jews who are a part of the LGBTQ community and who might've been rejected by traditional Judaism could congregate and marry if they wanted to. I'd yet to step inside one myself but I vow I will one day.

I frown. "But, as you know Tel Aviv is a world away from my family."

"Mine too."

"I want to go there." I've already added it to my bucket list.

He smirks. "Maybe I could take you one day."

"That would be cool."

"The beaches are wonderful too."

"I bet." I can't take my eyes off his cock—thick, long and just beautiful.

He follows my eyeline. "You're a jealous thing, aren't you?"

“I suppose I am.” I reach out and wrap my hand around it, feeling the smoothness of it against my fingers and its heat. I fist it from root to tip, swiping away the precum gathered at the fat head. “I’d love to have one of these things.”

Eli’s laugh rumbles his chest.

“Would you let me put it in you if I did?” I make my eyes big, wide and innocent.

“No.” His thick brows knot. “No one is going near there, River, *ever*.”

I wiggle my brows playfully. “But you can put it in me?”

“Yes, absolutely, in whichever hole you want me to.” He chuckles.

“You wish to *defile* me?” A sly smile touches my lips.

“Yes, of course.”

We crack up laughing like silly kids and I squeal more when Eli tickles me.

He pulls my weight on top of him and keeps his hands on my hips. In less than a few seconds, I’m on his cock, rising and falling, taking every inch of his girth, milking him with my pussy, desperate. His face contorts into the most beautiful adoring expression. It doesn’t take long, never does. It all happens in less than five minutes. I come quick, whining like a drowning cat as the sensation sends an intense orgasm ripping through my flesh. I squirm on his dick as it pulses filling me with more of his cum. And then I collapse, depleted.

The boom of his heartbeat is against my cheek.

I’m reminded Eli is different from me. More serious. Less interested in what people think about him. Always has been. I could learn a lot from this man. A day has never gone by where I haven’t realized he’s taught me something. I’m not as brave as him. I want to be, but I’m not. It’s the only truth I’m willing to admit to myself. At least right now.

“Please stay tonight.” His voice is sleepy and soft.

With my face planted against his hard chest, I nod a few times. “I’m

terrified.”

He grunts. “No one is going to hurt you, River.”

“I know,” I lie.

“Who gives a fuck what they think.” He holds me tight to his chest.

“Yeah.”

“I promise you everything will be fine.”

And for the first time in a long time, I accept that although words have the power to hurt and destroy, they also have the power to heal.

“I love you, Eli, I always have.”

“I know, River Blue.”

WORDS.

Formed by letters.

To make sentences.

And sentences linked together are power.

They tell a story and a well-written tale makes a book.

Did I ever really get that when I started this project?

I think not.

The cursor on the screen winks at me. One. Two. Three. Then does it again.

I type a few more words and smile because today is the first time I've wondered why exactly I've made Raziel a complete basket case in this story. If she existed in real life, she'd need to be in an insane asylum. She's a perfect blend of Courtney Love, think mid-nineties when she was in Hole. Pee-Wee Herman. And Kanye West at the very entertaining present.

Like I said.

A whack job.

Flicking through the hardcopy of my manuscript. The one with all of Eli's stupid little notes scribbled on it in red. And there it is in big bold block writing: **Why is she so fucking insane?** More notes are scribbled down the entire right side of the page. Just the sight of them burns my eyes and causes my brain to *ache*.

"I don't fucking know," I say to myself.

While reading the original manuscript, if someone would believe me, I'd swear I hadn't written it. In fact, I'd put my hand on some holy book and tell the masses I *never* had written draft version one. It's different, in voice, in tone and in intent. And by God, it-is-horrible.

Fuck.

So, I'm nearly to the end of the task in fixing it but in the process,

I've changed the story. It's lighter. It's funnier. It's more of a love story than some tragic, sappy tale.

Eli's notes keep going and in blue ink he's scratched through around two hundred "deep breath" phrases. The note next to the very last one reads: **Is she hyperventilating? Perhaps, she requires an inhaler. Is she a fucking asthmatic? She takes A LOT of deep breaths.**

I let out a deep breath.

Fingering through more of the pages, I read the endless notes and hate myself even more on every point because Eli is right. He seemed annoyed about the relationship Raziel has with Hajile. So, the part when Hajile decides he isn't in love with Raziel, I've cut it out completely, and it somehow slows, if not stops Raziel's downward spiral altogether. That along with two other plot points in the story I've changed entirely.

If I cut any more out, I'll no longer have a story. All that'll be left is around ten thousand words of love stuff and ten thousand more words of *fluff*. I kick my desk just once, then feel better again.

The cursor is still blinking, waiting for me.

Lifting my hands from the keyboard, I sit back in my chair and take in the view in the distance of the Brooklyn Bridge. It's beautiful this time in the morning when the mid-August golden sun is rising, and the sky is hazy and full of seagulls which soar high above it. Out the window across the room, I have a perfect view of the Statue of Liberty who's holding her torch high above her head in her right hand.

Wiley wanders over. Scrubbing his head, I press a kiss to the top of it and wonder how simple life would be if I were a dog. I'd sleep. I'd eat. I'd shower my master with attention and then I'd do it all again the next day. Simple.

If only...

Truthfully, I don't think anyone will *ever* read this story. And that gives me freedom I suppose to write whatever the fuck it is I want. Maybe that's what I did with the first draft and that's why it sucks. Laughing to/at myself, I give Wiley a soft swat on the butt. He moves across the room, then

drops down in his big dog bed like he's had a hard day. Then keeps his eyes on me as if to ask: What are you waiting for? Finish your book, dude!

After ending the chapter I'd been working on with a *really* dumb sentence, I stand and march toward the bathroom. I linger at the door for just a second, then flick on the light and mosey right on in. Ahead of me is the new mirror Tosh had installed a few weeks ago.

Instead of cowering or feeling like I should run for my life, today, I face it.

And admittedly, I like what I see.

I remove the elastic from my hair and redo my messy man-bun.

Blinking a few times, I absorb the sight of my blue eyes and run a hand over my closely trimmed beard, then smile. It's so bright, I think it could light up the entire Third World. The glee that floats through me is incredible.

After twenty-four years of waiting for this, I finally feel right.

I feel like me.

And I look *exactly* how I should.

How I feel *inside* matches how I appear *outside*.

And it's fanfuckingtastic.

The scars on my chest are still healing and I'm no longer as sore as I had been...back when I was hiding the surgery I'd secretly had. My face shape has changed. My voice is considerably deeper. The hair all over my body is thicker. I've even put on a bit of weight.

I-look-like-a-man.

And it's perfect.

Leaving the bathroom, I head for the kitchen and pour myself a cup of coffee. My new birth certificate sits on the countertop next to another pile of documents.

In the last few weeks, I'd had all my personal documentation changed—passport, driver's license, social security card, all my bank information and medical records to reflect that I am male. All a huge pain in the ass. Expensive Troublesome. And slow. *Really* slow. But definitely worth it. The process is so awful that only a fraction of people ever bother with it. I only have Barry to work on last and since I'll be back to work soon, I couldn't think of any better way than doing it face-to-face.

I'd discovered in my quest to have all my documents changed, that some states—Montana, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota and so on—won't think twice about changing a person's gender on legal documents unless you can provide proof of surgery that you've altered your private parts, or if the request is made under court order.

I snatch up my cellphone when it buzzes.

Eli: I picked up a pizza and beer. I'm coming over.

Me: Now?

Eli: I'll be at your place in a few hours.

Me: I'm busy finishing Raziels Story.

Eli: Good, I can't wait to rip apart your words.

Me: It isn't ready yet?

Eli: Nothing is ever ready, chicken. Stop putting it off.

We've been hanging out for a while now. At least a few times a week and I stayed over at Eli's place once or twice because it was too late to get back to Brooklyn. It was all easy and relaxed. Nothing ever felt forced. I didn't have to be someone I wasn't in front of him. I didn't have to hide. Often, we didn't even have sex. We just hung out, watched TV, cracked jokes and then fell asleep much of the time side by side.

I don't know what to make of what's happening, but it feels good.

Wiley jogs toward me with his leash between his teeth and puts it in my hand.

With a groan, I rush toward the front door and push my feet into my

sneakers. “You want to go out, boy?” I scrub him on the head and when I yank open the door I almost dissolve into the floor.

“*Riverrrrr.*” Abby’s hand reaches up to cover her mouth.

“Mom.”

We stand in eerie silence just staring at each other, debating who’ll say more first. Wiley whimpers. Abby looks at me in horror as if I just littered. When I open my mouth to speak, my attention is stolen away by Tosh who opens the door to his apartment, which is just across the hallway, and stands in the open door.

Abby twists around to look at Tosh who’s never up at this hour in the morning. Not completely anyways. Tosh if he is awake is usually parked in front of his TV puffing a spliff, debating the meaning of life and how much a one-way ticket to Mars will cost him. Abby is still bug-eyed as she watches him, no doubt taking in his attire of a plaid shirt, holey jeans and beat-up sandals. He could double as a homeless person with that outfit on.

“Oh, good morning, Mrs. Roth,” Tosh says.

Abby smiles uncomfortably. “Oh, hello, Tosh. I—I—” Her voice lifts a few octaves.

Tosh fixes his yellow beanie over his long, bleach-blond dreads and takes a few steps toward me. He gifts me with a bright smile and reaches for Wiley’s leash, taking it from my hand. “I can take Wiley, River. It’s no problem.” His booming voice and thick Jamaican accent fills the hallway.

“Yeah, sure, thanks.”

Abby’s mouth is still gaped open. Now both of her hands are up and covering it.

Tosh laughs a little. “I can always use a walk outside, even if it’s hot.”

I have two options. I can start blabbering and explain, or, I can run.

“River.” Abby takes a few steps toward me and even in shock my mother is beautiful. A mauve silk scarf covers her dark hair which is pulled back in a demure bun and the navy-blue, A-line dress she’s wearing is

flattering along with her low heels. You'd never guess this woman is a day over sixty years old, but she is. Her blue eyes pin me where I stand. The color sweeps me up and reminds me she's responsible for giving me my own pair of remarkable marbles.

My stomach sinks a little more the longer she remains speechless.

I back out of the way and allow her inside. She doesn't look at me anymore, only peers around my messy abode. When the door shuts, she twists around to face me.

It takes everything in me not to look away from her—the way I used to do when I had to face the mirror. But it's difficult and I can admit that being under her gaze somehow feels different from the last time I saw her.

“River.” She covers her mouth and nose with both of her hands again.

I squeeze my eyes shut, then open them once more. After about a minute of her calling my name and *almost* asking me the endless questions which tug at her lips, I feel my fury rising. All I did was grow a beard. She's acting like I cut out my eyes!

“Mom, please.”

She shakes her head rapidly and comes closer.

I can barely handle my own tears half the time. Her weeping has me unsettled and each one of her tears that soaks her hand leaves me standing in a puddle of guilt.

She cups my jaw with her hand, feeling the hair there. “It's real.”

I stay silent and allow her to examine me. She touches me. My face. My hair. She peeks down the front of my T-shirt to eyeball the light patch of hair there. And then she places her hand over my heart. She sobs more when she slides it a bit to the right, then the left and accepts my breasts are gone.

“River, what have you done?” She backs away from me and cries.

My eyes burn but not with regret. Only because I'm causing her pain. But, I won't say sorry for this. I won't apologize anymore for being me.

I pull her against me and hold her tight. “I couldn't tell you.”

With a nod, she cries more.

“You can’t tell Dad or Adam, Mom.”

She nods, still sobbing. “I came here because I haven’t seen you. We haven’t seen you in so long.”

Letting her go, I rush over to the kitchen to grab some tissues.

“I came by a few days ago to tidy up and no one was here. I couldn’t get inside. I’ve been going out of my mind wondering what on earth is going on, River.”

Pressing the tissue to her cheek, I sponge away her tears. “I’m fine. I’ve just needed some time away. I was going to come and see you, Mom, eventually, just not yet. I didn’t know where I’d start with explaining this to you.”

With a shaky hand, she takes the tissue from me.

A loud sigh escapes me as she walks around, kicking things out of the way with her shoe. She shoves a pile of magazines off the kitchen stool, puts her purse down and takes a seat.

It’s Saturday morning.

This isn’t the way I thought I’d be spending it...

The idea of having a beer is only growing in its appeal.

How do you explain to a mother who loves her little girl more than her own life that she no longer has a daughter anymore, but a son? How do I explain to her that the old River is never coming back? That she’ll never see me in a dress *ever* again. Not that she had that many times during my life. And that we’d never go shopping for my wedding dress together but would now be searching for a three-piece suit. All the mother/daughter things Abby has ever dreamt about doing with me are never going to happen. And some part of me feels so guilty for that.

She cries more.

Fuck.

I resist the urge to be a jerk because I know I need to acknowledge that this is like a death for my mother. Her daughter has gone away and she's never coming back.

I wander over to where she sits and place a hand on her shoulder. "I'm the same person, Mom, just different."

"I know. I know. I know." She hangs her head low. "I'm not going to pretend I didn't sense something was going on with you, River. I didn't know what it was. I worried you were depressed or something. And these disappearing acts have had me pulling out my hair." She finally lifts her head to look at me. "I just wanted to help."

"I'm fine." I smile. "Really, Mom, I am."

She wipes her eyes. "I guess I thought you'd grown out of this, River. I always hoped you'd grow out of it."

I shake my head from side to side when I realize that Abby is misinformed just like most people about being a transgender person.

Years ago, when I was a teenager, my parents had sent me to a doctor to undergo gender conversion therapy to *cure* me. God, it fucked me up. They told me I was mentally ill when I knew I wasn't. They told me I needed to be fixed. They drilled it in my head that I was born a girl—as if it wasn't obvious—and that I had to live my life as a woman no matter how I felt. Nowadays, the practice of conversion therapy has been confirmed as unethical, which it is, and in most states it's even illegal, as it should be. Back then, on every single day of my shitty teenage life I had enough crap to deal with and being told I was crazy, by some quack doctor only made me feel more confused, abandoned and alone.

I lift a shoulder. "You don't grow out of this, Mom."

She stares at me blankly.

"It isn't a phase. This is who I am. And I've never felt better."

"Really?"

"Yes."

She pulls me in for a fierce hug, practically choking me, and I feel all the love from her that's made me into the man I've become. It's a while before she lets me go. "I've missed you so much."

"I've missed you too, Mom."

"I don't know what to say, River. I truly don't."

I frown.

She swallows. "You look good though." She runs a hand over my beard and cups my chin, her blue eyes swimming with confusion. "You look handsome." She laughs.

"Thanks."

"I never thought I'd say that." She rolls her eyes. "My daughter is handsome."

Her eyes drift lower, lower, lower in speculation, then they flick back up to my face. "Did you?"

It's a question only a mother could ask. Anyone else and I'd be in their throat attempting to rip the *entire* thing out.

"No, Mom."

She pulls me into her once more and pats my back as if I'm five years old again and I just skinned my knee. "Okay, River. Okay."

I say nothing more about my "parts" and she doesn't ask additional questions.

"I just don't know how I will explain this to people, River."

I back away and regard her with pity. *Who gives a fuck what they think!* "You don't have to explain. It's nothing to *explain*, Mom. I'm still River. I'm just different."

"I'm glad you didn't change your name."

"No need to." I smirk. "Besides, I like my name. But I guess if it were Cindy or Melissa I'd have to change it to something like Ralph or Charles."

“No, the name River suits you, honey. It always has.” She smiles and gives me an adoring look. “As soon as you were born I knew the name was meant for you.” She gazes out the window. “Benjamin wanted to name you something more traditional. A Hebrew name. But the first glimpse I had of your sweet face, I knew your name *had* to be River.” She dabs at her eyes. “You were so special and *those* eyes of yours... You are still very, very special and anyone who can’t see that is a fool.”

I manage a smile. “Thank you, Mom.”

“River,” she whispers. “A river is powerful. It moves all around the earth, carving out rock and stone, making a path, making its own way. Its own journey.” She turns to face me. “I was always fascinated with the water when I was a girl.” She hangs her head low. “It was such a force and I myself imagined being like it one day.”

My face scrunches a little.

Abby continues to speak. “I wanted to be so many things, River. But, I had to be a wife and a mother. And I liked that, don’t get me wrong. I’d never regret my life with the three of you. Never.” She fiddles with her hands. “But I wanted to go to college.” The look in her eyes is wistful. “I had so many dreams. So many.”

“So why didn’t you...do all those things, Mom?”

All my life Abby has been a stay-at-home mother. Benjamin worked and gave us everything financially that we needed and more. He wasn’t cheap. If there was something material Abby wanted Benjamin never denied her. She didn’t have to work. Abby was always at home to help with my homework or to take care of me if I was sick. She was a good mother. But I always got the feeling she settled.

Her head hangs low. “I did what they told me to do.”

I stay quiet.

And I sense shame and possibly regret behind her words. “I was too afraid to stand up to everyone. To fight. To live my life how I truly wanted to.” She wipes her tears. “My parents, God bless their souls, were strict Hasidic Jews from the Ukraine. The only way I was getting away from them

was if I got *married*. So, that's what I did."

I take her hand in mine.

"But, I always think about what my life might've been like River if I'd run off to live my dreams—if I'd fought for what I wanted. "She regards me with pain etched across her beautiful features. "If I'd had the *courage*." She snuffles. "Like you, River."

"Oh, Mom."

"I've always wanted you to be *powerful*."

I nod a few times.

She pulls her hand out of mine and holds hers up. "If there is one thing I ever say to you, River, it's this. You must live your life the way you want to." She tips her head forward giving me a blue-eyed glare that could freeze me into solid ice. "It's your life, River, no one else's. I can't say I understand what you're going through because I don't. But I do know how much pain you've been in because of it since you were a little girl." Her voice quavers. "And there was *nothing* I could do about it. I couldn't help you."

"I know."

"I mean, I tried, River, really I did. And I don't know if my efforts did more damage or if they really helped." She shakes her head furiously, then exhales. "I always just wanted to see you grow up and get married to a nice man and have some children one day."

Newsflash: No desire to get married and children have never *really* been on my radar but as of lately I find myself thinking about things I never have.

Shit.

"Boys didn't like me, Mom."

"I know." She sucks in a harsh breath. "I know, River."

Her pity crashes over me like a rough wave taking me under.

I swim out of it, away.

I adjust my posture and stand straighter, taller, bigger. “And I hardly had any friends, Mom.” I scrub my jaw and face her, chin tipped high. Proud of my sad fucking story.

“I know.” A tear rushes down her cheek. “Eli—”

“Eli’s *always* been my friend.”

“I know, River. I’m sorry that there were things I just couldn’t understand. No matter how much I tried I just couldn’t get in your head to see what was going on with you. But I don’t want you to be sad anymore, River. And you’ve been sad for a very long time. And I hate that. I really *fucking* hate that.”

My eyes fill with tears but I laugh a little at her profanity which surprises me. She yanks me in for another tight hug and kisses my cheek. I brush her hair back into place admiring the mahogany strands which have come loose that reminds me of where I got my thick hair from.

“What do I call you from now on?”

“River.” I smile. “But the standard pronouns, you, he and him will apply.”

She nods. “Okay, but just give me a little while to get used to it.”

“Okay.”

“This place is a mess.”

What’s new?

Abby stands from the chair and surveys my apartment.

“Mom, please. I can—”

Her blue eyes widen. “You what?” She genuinely looks offended by my statement.

“I hired a cleaning lady.”

“Why’d you do that?”

I scratch the back of my neck. “Because I can’t have my mother

cleaning my apartment.” I practically laugh out loud at her question.

Her brows knot. “Don’t be so silly, River. It’s what I enjoy doing, honestly.” She bites her bottom lip. “I know everything has changed but not *everything* has to, River. I love coming here twice a week and hanging out with you. I don’t want that to change too. Let’s just try and do this somehow.” She reaches down and picks up an old magazine, searching for its place. “Besides, I want to get used to your new face.” Her smile is sad.

“You can’t tell Dad yet, especially not Adam.”

Unless you want to start World War III...

She presses her lips together and nods. “I’ll keep your secret.”

“Thank you.”

“I’m your mother, River, I’ll do *anything* for you.”

“I know.”

She inhales. “But you have to tell your father soon. He won’t like it if he finds out we’ve been hiding this from him. You know this. It’ll be very bad, River, if you wait too long. This is New York City.”

My eyes narrow at her words.

This *is* New York City.

Fuck, she’s right.

“I promise, Mom, I’ll tell Dad soon. I’m just waiting for the right time.”

Do I truly believe my own lie?

I have no plans to do ANY such thing!

Honestly, I don’t think Benjamin could ever accept this. Abby is only speaking out of fear. I personally have no desire to make the severe acid reflux Benjamin suffers from any worse. Besides, he pays my rent. It’s easier for me to just stay under the radar. Hide. Evade. One wrong move and I’ll be living out of a cardboard box in a filthy alley and eating my dinner out of a

shoe.

“I love you.” Abby’s cheeks are pink and her eyes are rimmed red.

“I love you more, Mom.”

With a grin, she kicks off her shoes and gets to work.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“SO, THIS IS IT, huh?” I wander around Eli’s office, touching things.

I breathe in the crisp aroma of fresh pages and the scent of lemon oil the furnishings in here must’ve recently have been cleaned with.

He sits behind his large desk and goes to war with his keyboard. His dark brows are pressed together, and his mouth is tight. His hair still looks a bit messy around his ears and neck even though I can tell he’s just had a haircut.

At the corner of his desk are lots and lots of books and in neatly arranged piles are more manuscripts. I wander across the room and finger through them, admiring all the titles, pen names and personalized letters from authors addressed to Eli. They go on to tell Eli about their dreams of being published and having their words out to the world. Most of them contain so much sentimental poop I wonder why they’d subject themselves to this sort of pain...just like I had.

“Why did you pick this job?” I tap on a pile of loose pages.

“Well, I love words. I love books. And I love everything to do with publishing. And believe it or not, I love writers.”

No smile. No twinkle in his eye. Nada.

I find it hard to believe but I suppose it’s the truth.

He fixes a loose strand of his hair back into place. “And when I was around fifteen years old, I read *To Kill a Mockingbird*.”

I lift a brow. “Picked it up once, flipped through it, put it back down.”

He laughs out loud.

“It isn’t a joke.”

“Shame.” He tsks a few times. “Well, River Blue, I read the entire thing in one night. It’s a great story about hope I’d read around a time when I needed *hope*. There’s no question of how it won the Pulitzer in 1961. It

changed my life.”

“Isn’t that what a great piece of literature is supposed to do?”

He sits back in his chair. “It depends.”

“On?”

His thick brows arch. “You’d have to be damn good to write something that’ll change someone’s life.” He chuckles. “But, I think if you can get a reader to think about subjects on a level they never have before, I think that’s acceptable. If you can make them see a different perspective. Or make them *feel* they’ve momentarily lived a life they’ve never imagined or would ever want for themselves, then I think your book has done its job.” He points a finger to the sky. “Oh, let’s not forget...if you can make them cry, there’s a fair bit of points for that. And there are certainly more points if you can make them laugh.”

I smile. “I’m not very funny.”

“I agree.”

Prick.

“Tell me something...” I start to say.

“Two white horses fell in mud.”

I gift him with *major* eyeroll and fail miserably at holding back my laugh. “Will I get better?” The question is for kicks.

“I love when those curious baby blues land on me.” He adjusts his glasses. “It depends on if you practice. If you practice then, yes, naturally your writing will improve. You’ll learn what works and what doesn’t. And after maybe having written a million words you’ll have developed your style.”

“I see.”

With the same pissed-off expression as before all over his face, he goes back to typing.

We coexist in the silence for a while, just like we always do when

neither of us feels the need to fill the air with mindless chatter. I like this. I could do this with Eli forever.

I keep touching stuff and find a few things around his office that tell me a little bit more about him...the stuff he hasn't told me yet, or rather the things I'm not caught up on. When I get to a small leather bag, I stop and stick my hand in.

I feel him watching me, but he doesn't halt my nosiness.

Reaching in, I find his gym card for the local YMCA. The keys to the Harley-Davidson he now owns. A hardcover of *The Soul of Man under Socialism* by Oscar Wilde. A pint of soda water. A bottle of Axe bodywash—the Anarchy one. *Fitting*...His MetroCard. And one half-eaten bag of dried apricots.

I pout, because honestly, I thought I'd find more interesting stuff in here.

I move back to the paper heap. After examining the cover page of a manuscript, I elevate my head to find Eli watching me.

“If it doesn't catch me at the first line, I give it a chance to the end of the first chapter, and if the first chapter doesn't get me, it gets tossed in there.” He points to a pile labeled: **SHREDDER**.

Brutal.

I laugh a little. “You certainly don't waste your time, do you?”

He takes off his glasses and sets them down, giving me an arrogant look. He folds his arms across his chest, wrinkling his perfectly pressed Oxford shirt as he does it. “Well, as you know, River, reading takes time. Tell me why I should sit for four or six or nine fucking hours and read *your* book if it's no good?”

My mouth twists into an awkward smile. “I don't know honestly.”

He points at me. “Then that's the problem.”

I turn a few pages of the manuscript in front of me. “I loved her. She loved herself.” I make a face. “Harsh.” I push it aside and go to the next one.

“My mother said I was a whore. I told her I learned from the best.” I laugh a little and move to the next one. “It was a warm and sunny day.”

“Stop,” Eli says loudly and points a finger at me. “Never start a story off with the weather.”

I nod and move to the next one. “Gunshots rang out!” I laugh.

Eli goes back to typing. “Nope.”

I get to the next one and it’s more of the same.

Eli stops typing for a minute. “She was a fragile child.”

My eyes collide with his, then I smile impressed that he remembered the first line of Raziel’s *revised* story.

“With eyes of blue mist and a heart purely constructed of broken dreams and a love unreturned, she was just a girl. A wild spirit who was dropped into a square world her circle soul didn’t fit in. Out of place. Like a peanut in an M&M. No one ever liked the peanut ones...Said they were too strange. They didn’t belong.”

I keep flipping through the pages as Eli recites the lines then pauses.

“Do you like it?” I tap on the pages in front of me.

“The peanut M&Ms? Of course. They were always my favorite.”

I chuckle.

He doesn’t. Only goes back to typing. “I think it’s a wonderful story, River.”

“Thank you.”

“I read it last night while you were asleep.”

I move to the bookshelves near the large floor-to-ceiling window, taking in the sight of the East River in the distance on this sunny morning.

“I feel like it’s turned into some cheesy love story.” I run my fingers over the spines of the immaculately kept books. Some of which I discover are autographed by the authors when I open them to their first pages. I set them

back in place.

“Is that what you intended the story to be?”

“No.”

When I get to the end of the shelf, I snatch up a frame and peer at it. It's Eli and me sitting next to each other in our soaking wet clothes on the stoop of my parents' house in Borough Park. I'm twelve years old and he's thirteen. The biggest smiles take up our faces. Adam's big head is between ours and he's giving both Eli and me rabbit ears. I run my fingers over the photograph and set it back down.

“I'm glad you cut out all the *suicide*.”

Twisting around, I face him. “Yeah.”

With a stern expression, he grunts and starts typing again.

Tame Impala's “Eventually” sounds from it. I sing along to the song and dance around like an imbecile for a little while.

“What do you love about New York City?” I snap my fingers to the beat.

Eli laughs. “*Everything*.” He lifts a finger.

I smile.

A few nights ago, we'd gone down to the West Village to watch an African dance group perform live. It was all bongos, body jerking and ululation. Tosh had even come along. We talked about every stupid thing imaginable from the meaning of life to the difference between Yoo-hoo and *real* chocolate milk. That conversation was all the ganja talking. We laughed. We danced. We drank *way* too much tequila. We made our way back to Eli's apartment and literally fell on the floor once we made it inside. And we woke up there, in that exact same spot, in the morning, groggy and groaning from our epic, self-inflicted hangovers.

Fuck, I loved every minute of it.

“No one works on a Saturday, Eli.”

“I do.”

I shimmy around his office, swaying to the beat. The melody flows through my veins and warms my insides. I’m like Raziel when she dances to her sour memories one last time before she lets *them all go*.

Eli’s mouth twitches up into a smile. He shoots up from his chair and snatches up his keys. “Okay, I’ve had enough of this.” His expression is comical.

I sing louder.

He laughs at me and I don’t care that I’m being silly.

I dance more!

He rushes across the room, takes my hand in his and yanks me out the door.

~

Taking my baseball cap off, I put it on my head backward.

My eyes swing between the three signs on the wall. **Men. Women. Family.**

Bodies travel past me. They all move ahead in their respective order. *Years* ago, if I waltzed into the ladies’ room looking like *this*, the likelihood of me being arrested and banned from Yankee Stadium for life would be very high.

But these days, since 2002 to be exact, it’s the law of the land in this great city that any individual has the right to use the bathroom consistent with their gender identity, regardless of their gender assigned to them the day they came into this wonderful world.

For a beat, fear takes over and I don’t know where to go.

Scrap that.

I take four steps ahead and stay left...in the men’s line.

The mac truck of a man in front of me gives me a nod. I puff my chest

up a little since I've been working out so much with Eli and gift him with the same "manly" nod in return. Planting my back against the wall, I laugh a little at myself that I hadn't considered how I'd deal with this situation when it fell on me.

The line moves ahead slowly.

And the closer we get to the door, the more nervous I become.

A woman standing in line across from me winks. I flinch at the action, wondering if it was meant for me. My eyes become perfect circles.

"You're hot!" She giggles.

"Thanks." I manage a pathetic smile then face forward, never looking at her again.

I guess I've passed.

When I make it into the men's bathroom and see them all lined up in front of the urinals, I make a beeline for a stall and shut the door so hard it almost comes off the hinges.

With my heart pounding, I pull off my cap and wipe the sweat from my forehead.

The old River is gone...

Your new life has begun.

You-are-a-dude.

Act like one.

Whatever that means...

I pee.

~

Eli stretches out in the seat next to me, his Yankees baseball cap pulled down over his forehead and the beer in his hand makes its way to his

lips.

I breathe in the hot summer air and gaze out at the field. It's been a while since I've sat in the stands of Yankee Stadium to watch a game.

The sun is high, and the place is packed with people. Some are angrier than others as we watch the Yankees deliver a crisp cut ass to the Rangers.

"Abby used to bring us here." I smile.

Eli's head jerks in my direction. "Really?"

I nod a few times. "Yeah, me and Adam all the time. We had to keep it a secret."

"I never would've thought that." He squints. "You never told me that."

I grin. "Like I said, it was a secret."

"Yeah, right."

He stretches out and puts his arm behind me. I lean into him, almost forgetting not just where we are but what I now look like. The pair next to us give us a curious glance. None of this should surprise or unnerve me. It's the same type of peeks I'd get whenever Beatrice and I would venture out...I don't move, and Eli doesn't even seem to notice the audience attention we've captured, or care.

"Benjamin said you came by the jewelry shop," I say.

"Yeah, a few weeks ago."

I dig into my popcorn just as the crack of the ball hitting the bat sounds through the stadium. People leave their seats to stand and the crowd goes wild when the Rangers make a home run. Eli stands and shouts a string of expletives, then plops back down. His face is covered in sweat and his eyes are furious.

I laugh.

When he meets my eyes, he fights back a smile, sits down and relaxes

again.

“Benjamin said you aren’t getting along with your family,” I state.

His previously happy expression dies right on his face. “Who told him that?”

“I don’t know,” I whisper.

He’s still glaring at me. “I didn’t tell him that.”

“I don’t know who told him that, Eli.” I eat more popcorn. “But he mentioned it to me, that’s all.” I wait for him to elaborate or to tell me more but it’s not his style.

The corner of his left eye twitches. “It’s nothing.”

Is it true? Or, isn’t it true? A rumor? A story? A fucking tall tale?

Tell me something!

He faces forward and focuses on the game. “It’s nothing, River, really.” He tosses the beer bottle into the trash can behind us with so much force it shatters when it hits the bottom.

“Okay.” Reaching down, I squeeze his hand, searching for his warmth.

Putting his arm around my shoulder once more, he shifts to face me.

“What?” I ask.

The world around us falls away. The only person I see is him and the only voice I hear is his. He has that look smeared across his face that tells me he’s thinking about far too much. So much that I know he’d never admit to it.

“Not all the time the people who raised you are family, River. And sometimes even the people who are the closest to you in life don’t understand you. It doesn’t make them bad. It doesn’t mean they hate you. It just means you’re on two different planes. And the ones who don’t understand, sometimes...” He blinks a few times. “You must be prepared to let them go.”

“Okay.”

“Okay.” He leans in and kisses my lips. “You are my family, River.”

I nod, wanting to ask more questions, but don’t.

Eli erupts into more shouting and cheering when the Yankees are up to bat. And the tension that moves around the stadium reminds me we’re in the eighth inning.

I rest my popcorn down, snatch up my beer and knock it back.

This feels so easy.

And I’ve never had simple.

I want uncomplicated.

Just sitting here being myself. Not pretending. Not bullshitting. Breathing. Living. Dreaming. Looking forward to the next minute of life and everything it has to offer.

Eli’s phone buzzes in his back pocket where it sticks out a bit. I stare down at the message that pops up.

Kelly6969: I miss you.

What the fuck?

I barely finish chewing the kernel in my mouth.

He reaches for his phone without looking at it, shuts it off and slips it into the side pocket of his jeans. When he plops back down into his seat, he gifts me with a boyish smile, then runs a hand through his hair.

So beautiful. So perfect. So *mine*?

I debate why exactly that question just went jogging through my mind.

The men in the row in front of us start bickering about who’s stepping up to bat.

“Go, Yankees!” I do a fist pump.

One of the men turn in my direction and grumbles something I can’t

quite hear. I'm still laughing and cheering for the team I came to watch. The smile on Eli's face is fake. The men in front of us are still at it and when their conversation gets heated and one continues to look my way, Eli shifts in his seat and pipes up.

"The Rangers will never come back from this!" Eli laughs.

The other douche standing next to the posse glares in our direction.

Eli doesn't flinch.

My insides melt like the strawberry ice cream the whiny kid a few seats away from me is holding in his hands and making a complete mess of.

Eli's hands flex at his sides and his jaw is set tight. It's all a bizarre reminder that although this man sits behind a desk each day examining the finest of purple prose, he doesn't back down from a backyard brawl. Ever.

Eli Noam Goldberg.

The hothead.

The fighter.

The no-nonsense taker.

These clowns are sizing each other up. Trying to figure out who the alpha male is. Cock measuring. It happens at some baser level in every interaction men have with each other.

Eli is still watching them with a blasé expression even though I'm fully aware he's boiling inside.

I'm just waiting for the bunch to say something stupid.

God, please, don't.

Frankly, I'd like this to be a pleasant Saturday afternoon without visits to the ICU or the police precinct or having to make a phone call to Blythe to come and bail us out of jail.

But, I have to admit if a fight breaks out here, I wouldn't back down.

"Hot dogs! Cotton candy! Beer! Popcorn! Pretzels! Peanuts!" A

vendor passes our row.

I shoot out of my seat and purchase two more beers and two hot dogs, asking for extra mustard, the way Eli and I always eat them. I make my way back to our spot to find the easy and pleasant mood has returned. I hand Eli the hot dogs and snatch up my popcorn. He quickly unwraps one of the hot dogs and has at it.

“Later, I want to take you to this cool Chinese place in Soho.” His words come out garbled around the hot dog he’s practically inhaling.

“Okay.”

“Then, we can go and play pool.”

“Yeah, sounds cool.”

He smiles. “Will you stay over tonight?”

“Yes, yeah of course.” I keep my eyes fixed on the game for a while.

I’m unable to force that message out of my head and before I’m able to calm my insecurities, the question is diarrhea from my mouth, spilling helplessly fast. “What did you ever see in me, Eli?”

He freezes mid-chew. “What do you mean?” His minty greens stay on me.

I tuck a loose strand of my hair behind my ear. I don’t know where I’m going with this and I know if I do keep going, I’ll just piss this guy off. Eli doesn’t do this. In fact, he *hates* this.

“What do you see in me?” I’m certain the look on my face is nothing short of pleading.

The crack of a ball against a bat. The crowd goes wild. People leave their seats to stand. We remain in ours, just staring at each other as though we’ve never met.

Eli finishes chewing and crumples up the wax paper in his hand.

I wait patiently to hear what he has to say.

“Don’t you see, River?” His eyes narrow on me. Sweet. Soft. Endearing. “Don’t you see you’re perfect?”

“No,” I whisper, dead serious. “No, I don’t, I guess, because I’m not.”

“You are in my eyes, River, you’ve always been.”

Please-fucking-clarify...

And when he doesn’t my frustration returns. So, I have another question. One I hope will be as invasive as I plan to make it. The one question I’ve always been curious about.

“Have you ever been in love?” I keep my eyes glued on his.

“I’m not one for repeating myself about these things.”

I see...

He takes the box of popcorn from me, tosses a few kernels in the air and catches them with his mouth.

“Impressive,” I whisper.

“But truthfully, River, I’d say no woman has loved me the way I need to be.”

“I see.”

Didn’t I just tell this bastard I love him less than a few weeks ago?

I focus on the field.

So does he.

Note to self: Don’t do that shit again.

“SO, YOU WALK IN here with a beard and you don’t expect for me to have questions?” Barry folds his arms across his chest and waits for me to respond. “Especially since I’ve already given you more than enough time to sort through whatever *crisis* it is you’ve been dealing with.”

“This is my notice.” I slide my resignation letter across his desk like it’ll explode any moment. “I’m giving you more notice than I have to.”

“Thank you.” His gray eyes narrow when he picks up the letter. “*Mr. River Peyton Roth.*”

I nod.

“This is incredible, River.” His laugh is deep and sincerely amused.

“If I didn’t know any better I’d think that hair comes unglued from your face.”

I stroke my chin with pride. “Nope, it’s real. It’s very real. As real as the old man beard on your face.”

He chuckles. “Incredible.”

Sonic Youth’s “Dirty Boots” sounds from the iPod dock across the room.

Surprisingly, Barry hadn’t peppered me with the questions I had expected but I suppose there’s still time for ignorance.

“I guess I have to accept that the best assistant I’ve ever had is now a man and that he’s also quitting, leaving my company less one loyal employee.”

“You still have Blythe.” I slide further down into the chair I’m sitting in and spread my legs wide, kicking my boot up on the edge of Barry’s desk.

“Yeah, I still have Blythe.” Nodding, he gazes out the window. “She’s quite special.”

“She is.”

“We squared away that calico shoot with no more hitches and a few more high-profile opportunities came along after that while you’ve been out

on vacation.”

I ignore his dig.

“Blythe works hard. I plan to keep her around.”

“Uh huh.” I keep my eyes pinned on Barry, realizing something. “So, you’ve been dating?”

“Yeah, I guess you could say that.”

He snaps out of his trance and faces me. “Where are you going to work?”

“I’m going to be a teacher.”

“A teacher.”

“Yeah, I haven’t really told anyone, so please—”

Barry’s hands lift in surrender. “Yes, of course, I understand. A teacher...”

“Yes.”

“Wow. A teacher of—”

“Sociology. It’s what I went to university for.”

Should I really have to tell Barry this?

He’d know this information if he’d spent more time looking at my resume’ when we’d first met instead of my ass.

“Sociology.” He runs a hand over his white hair. “Well, I can’t stop you.”

He rips open the resignation letter and reads it over.

On my way here, while walking down Worth Street, I passed two women who were linked arm-in-arm laughing. I pulled my Yankees cap on tighter, concealing most of my face. The blonde in the pair stopped and did a double take as I passed by. “*River*,” she called out my name softly, and it drifted on the warm breeze, propelling me to slow down. I continued walking

but twisted around a bit, allowing her to get a good look at my new mug. With shock written all over her face like I'd just smacked her in it with a heinous bill, Beatrice lifted her hand in a stunned wave sort of thing. With a smile, I waved back, then tucked my hands back into my pockets and kept walking.

The crisp sound of paper rustling when Barry shoves my letter back into its envelope jerks me back to the present.

“This is sufficient, River, and I appreciate you giving me time to find a replacement for you. It’s a tough job. Truthfully, I thought you would’ve walked out on me by now. Anyways, I’m grateful you *stayed*.”

“Okay then.” I stand and head for the doors.

“River.” Barry’s voice stops me.

I spin around. “Yes.”

“I know this is none of my business...”

Oh, God.

I wait for his words.

“But, are you worried about finding a boyfriend, or—or—or a girlfriend?”

“No.”

He nods. “I would be.”

“I’m not.”

“It’s just it might be difficult finding a guy who doesn’t care you used to be a girl or a girl who doesn’t mind you aren’t a real guy.”

Didn’t I say there’s always time for ignorance...

I laugh out loud on the inside. A *real* guy. I’ve been a man all my fucking life!

“I mean, I wouldn’t—”

“Yeah sure, Barry.” I stop him before he says something that might incite a riot.

“You just used to be so pretty, such a beautiful girl, like Blythe.”

I think Blythe has always been prettier than me...

The corner of my mouth tips up into a small smile. “Yeah, like Blythe.”

Barry slips into some sort of porno dream. “I’m going to fuck her real soon.”

My brows lift.

Barry grins, then sucks his teeth when he looks me over once more, taking in my exceptionally male appearance. “Such a shame.”

“Good night, Barry.” I head for the doors.

“Good night, River.”

I do hope, someday soon, Blythe decides to tell Barry she *used* to be a man.

“SO, RIVER PEYTON ROTH, Arun Sa wad. Good morning.” Doctor Beorsalve glides across the room in his chair on wheels until he’s sitting right in front of me, right below where I’m perched on the examination table.

“Good morning.”

He smiles and cocks his head to the side. “Are you sure it’s good, River?”

“Yes.”

He adjusts his glasses then pinches the bridge of his nose before he talks to himself for a little while and stands. He picks a neon green file which I assume includes everything about me from my blood type to the last time that bitch came to visit me and peruses through my life story.

I take the time out to stare at the bright yellow walls in here which make me feel as if I’m in some sort of funhouse rather than a doctor’s office.

Doctor Meksuru Beorsalve is one of the leading doctors who specializes in care for transgender people, not that it’s really any different, as he always reminds me. Despite his quirky personality, dry sense of humor and unique way of dressing, I quite like him.

Today, he’s wearing pink Crocs, ripped-up indigo jeans and a baggy Grateful Dead T-shirt. He hasn’t shaved in a few days and he’s long overdue for a haircut.

I allow all the diplomas, degrees and medical certifications which decorate the walls in here to remind me that I’m in the hands of a skilled professional who has more than twenty years in the field. I also ignore the fact that instead of the usual “dentist office” music I expect to be playing in here, that Live’s “I Alone” sounds softly from the stereo on a shelf.

Doctor Beorsalve strides across the room singing and bobbing his head to the beat. He reaches out and turns the volume down still not looking at me.

While it’s probably standard to strip out of all your clothes when you come to the doctor’s office, I don’t have to do that anymore. Usually we just have a chat about the weather, what I ate for dinner last night and the latest

update on our favorite TV shows.

It's all very informal, and I like that.

"Have you been having any issues? Any stress?" He glances up from the file.

"No."

After the long look, he gets back to reading. "Good."

In addition to running his own practice, Doctor Beorsalve also heads up the Center for Vaginal Rejuvenation and performs more than a thousand gender confirmation surgeries a year.

This man knows more about my vagina than I do.

Doctor Beorsalve himself is a transgender person. It's why I picked him and after reading his history and about his life which he doesn't like to talk much about when he was a woman, I trust this man with my life and *all* my body parts.

He sucks his teeth, drops the file down and walks over to me.

I lift my shirt up, allowing him to take a look.

"This looks wonderful. It's all healing quite nicely and at least the hair on your chest covers the scars." He taps me on the shoulder. "And you've been working out. Good stuff."

I smile.

Doctor Beorsalve sits down in his chair. "How do you feel?"

"I feel wonderful, honestly." I bite my lip. "I haven't exactly told my family I'm transitioning."

He frowns. "Ideally, you should, but every person is different. It's really up to you when you decide to tell them, River, but the longer you wait the more awkward it may be and the longer it may take them to adjust."

"Yeah, I know."

"Any other concerns?"

I shove my hands down between my thighs keeping them warm.
“Well, there is one thing...”

“Shoot.” He claps his hands just once. “Tell me what that one thing is.”

I tell Doctor Beorsalve about the encounter I had with the woman at the Yankees game in the bathroom line. He listens intently, bobbing his head. When I finish with the story, I huff. “I feel like a man, like I always have. I’ve never had much concern about what’s in my pants, but I guess I worry I might not be accepted fully as a man, since I don’t you know have a—”

“Okay, I see.” He sits back in his chair, spreading his legs wide. “We certainly don’t want you to feel that way, but you must always remember that being a man is so much more and goes far beyond what’s in one’s pants.”

“Yes, I know.”

“Do you know how many cisgender men walk the face of this earth each day with the biggest cocks around...” He squints. “But they don’t take care of their children. They treat their significant other’s like dirt. They don’t contribute to society in *any* way. Or pay their fuckin’ taxes. I can’t say we should call *them* men.”

I suck in a breath.

“Being a man is so much more than having a penis, River.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“I’ve been caring for you since you decided to transition, and from what you tell me the severe gender dysphoria you had has all but gone away because you’re now happy with your appearance.”

“Yes, it has.” I can’t keep my smile under control.

“Some decide that is enough and are comfortable with not going any further. They don’t want the expense or to have to deal with the health risks and risks of complications, or they simply don’t have a problem with their original plumbing.” He grins. “Some people want to change what’s downstairs after transitioning. Some people don’t.” He lifts his shoulders so high they touch his ears. “It’s as simple as that.”

I nod a few times.

“I’m popular, of course, for performing gender confirmation surgeries.” He makes a funny face. “But most people call the famous Doctor Bower.” He lifts a finger to the sky. “Did you know that they are now calling her “The Georgia O’Keefe of Genitalia?” He laughs.

So do I.

“I suppose the moniker is well earned.” He laughs more.

Glancing to my left, I examine the poster on the wall which shows a detailed depiction of how the surgeons here can take a man’s penis and turn it into a very pretty vagina capable of normal orgasm, along with a fully-functioning clitoris in a surgery called vaginoplasty.

“I’ve read up a bit about phalloplasty and metoidioplasty,” I say.

And in what I’d found there were success stories and some horror stories about complications and pee going places it shouldn’t after surgery which led to infections. I could go on...Anyways, it shouldn’t be a surprise that it’s easier for doctors to turn a penis into a vagina, since there’s more tissue, than it is to construct a penis from essentially nothing. It’s *a lot* more work.

“And?” Doctor Beorsalve scoots closer.

I gaze out the window at the United Nations Building.

“Do you want one?” he asks as if it’s as simple as ordering a pizza.

I hesitate to answer.

He slants his head to the side, regarding me with concern. “There’s no clean and cut answer for this, River. Every transgender person’s story is different. But, if you want one, I can give you one. I can even *rejuvenate* what you already have.” He grins like the pusher man. “But in my opinion, which I’ve confirmed and so has the state of New York, you are a *man*, River.”

“I know,” I whisper.

“But—”

“I mean I like them. I *love* them.” I laugh. “But to have one...*Honestly*, no.”

“Okay, then.” He bobs his head a few times.

“Okay.”

With his thick brows knotted, he flexes in his chair. “Now, where in the hell do you think the parents on *Stranger Things* think their kids are half the time?”

CHAPTER EIGHT

“TAKE IT OFF! TAKE it off! Take it off!” Eli chants, slapping his hand down in the sand with each word.

Ugh.

I stand facing blue ocean ahead.

In the few weeks which have passed, I feel more like myself and it fuckin’ rocks.

Now, we’re standing on Manhattan Beach.

Eli had rolled out his Harley-Davidson Street 750 this morning and dusted it off before he shoved a helmet my way. With the nudge of his chin, I swung my leg over the back of the bike and eased down into the leather seat. He kicked over the engine which I swear shook the entire street before he twisted the throttle and headed for Ocean Parkway.

It’s an incredible day. The sun is high. The sky is cerulean and dotted with plump white clouds. The seagulls dip and dance around above, crying out with each beautiful swoop.

Eli stands.

I peer up at the clever look on his face, then admire his muscular chest and how he looks in his orange board shorts. The anxiety that hits me feels odd.

The beach isn’t crowded but there are enough people here to rock my nerves. I’m nicely toned from hitting the gym and eating way better than I had been before. There’s no shame there.

Eli leans in, putting his lips to my ear. “Take it off, River.”

With a few deep breaths, I grab the hem of my T-shirt.

“Come on,” he encourages.

I resist the urge to smile even though I really want to.

Why do I feel like I'm about to flash these people and get arrested?

I shake the ridiculousness of my thoughts away and do exactly as Eli commands. I take my shirt off. As soon as the salty breeze hits my skin, my stomach muscles tighten, and my nipples turn into hard pebbles. I twist around slowly, nervously and look around, conscious that someone is going to point at me in just a minute and yell "flasher!" But no one says a word. In fact, no one even notices me.

I'm shirtless and breast-less.

Eli snickers. "You look like you're about to lose your virginity."

"Ah, fuck off."

He laughs. "In fact, right now, you look just like you did that day in the closet at my parents' house."

I shift my stance.

"You have that same look in your eyes, River."

"And what look is that?"

He smirks. "Like you really want to even though you're truly afraid."

Pursing my lips, I nod. "I see."

"Yeah." His eyes narrow. "Yep, it's the exact same look."

"I thought you forgot about that day." I wiggle my toes in the sand.

"Nah, I couldn't forget about that, River Blue. I never forgot about that."

I roll my neck, avoiding that look in his eyes which makes me nervous. "It was my first time." I always guessed it would've been obvious, but you never know...My eyes crawl over his torso and stop at his face to find that smug look I'm quite used to.

He rubs his nose. "Yeah, it was mine too."

Wow.

An exhale leaves me in surprise.

I suppose it explains the *vigor* with which he did everything that day...

“That’s cool.” I bite my lip.

“Yeah, it was cool.”

We laugh.

He faux punches me in the shoulder.

The sound of the waves crashing into the shoreline and the squeals coming from the group of teenage girls just behind us yanks me into a nightmare. I squeeze my eyes shut when the flashbacks hit me like memories from a war I’ve never been to.

I was last at this very beach during Camp Crush one summer. The girls in my group ripped off my bathing suit top. Told me I didn’t need it because I was flat-chested anyhow, and of course...that I was a dude.

It was fucking horrible.

I should’ve gone all Nurse Ratched on them but instead all I did was rage away the afternoon in a filthy bathroom stall before the camp counsellor forced me to come out.

Later that day when I got home, I threw myself down the stairs, claiming I tripped. I didn’t care what would happen to me. I just wanted to never have to go back to Camp Crush. However, Benjamin and Abby had paid a mint for me to go so that was out of the question. And get this, *I’d* chosen the summer camp myself because some girl named *Kimberly* convinced me to sign up! I’ve learned never to trust a woman named Kimberly or Tiffany or Britney. I digress...Anyways, it turned out Kimberly had a running bet with her besties she’d prove I was a lesbian.

What a mess!

Why would I have been into such a bitch anyways? Ugh.

Anyways, Camp Crush had *crushed* me!

So, after I landed at the bottom step when I hurled my skinny ass

down the flight of stairs, I screamed in agony because I broke my wrist. It snapped like my spirit had that day. So, Abby and Benjamin couldn't send me back to Camp Crush anyhow. Then, summer was over. BOOM.

I never told anyone about that incident with the bathing suit top, nor did I ever plan to.

So many secrets...

"I have *bad* memories of this beach," I say all the words slowly.

God, why did we come here?

Eli gazes at me.

"But, this feels different." I massage the goose bumps on my arms away.

"So, let's re-write the bad memories, River, like you did Raziel's Story." He ties the string of his board shorts tighter, then pins me with a serious expression.

"Yeah, I suppose we could."

He gives me a handsome smile. "On the count of three."

"Okay."

"One!" He takes off running for the shoreline.

"ASSHOLE!" I sprint across the sand, trying my best to catch up. Eli dives in the water, head first. I run straight in ignoring the roar of the waves as they crash into the sand. The sensation of the cool, salty wetness when it hits my skin steals my breath away.

When I pop to the surface, Eli is wading just in front of me. Our breaths are labored as we tread water.

"I feel naked!" I send a wave in his direction.

"Hey, no splashing."

"I'm sorry, I couldn't help it."

He comes closer. The water sluices over our skin, salty and cool and the hot sun beats down on us, warming my shoulders.

Eli smiles.

I splash him once more. “Have you ever thought of having children?”

His gaze lowers for a split second. “I suppose I have.”

I dip down, wet my face in the water and look at him once more.

“Why do you ask?” He takes some water in his mouth, then spits it out.

“I don’t know. I guess I was just wondering. We’ve never talked about it.”

“Why would we?” His tone is caustic.

“I—I—”

“I’ve never heard you speak about child *rearing*, River.” He practically chokes on nothing just thinking about it. “And I’ve never seen myself as the best father in the world.”

“No, I know.”

“You’ve never asked me anything like this. Why now?”

I don’t know!

“I don’t know. I just wondered that’s all.” I swim away from him.

He reaches for my hand and stops me. “I think you should focus on more important things, River, rather than worry about stuff like that.”

“Why aren’t you getting along with your family?”

Eli jerks his head back. “We go from talking about kids to discussing my family?”

God, I feel like a lunatic right now. Like a whiny bitch in love with a man who clearly isn’t ready for anything more than what we have...whatever that is. This man has me wanting everything with him I’ve never wanted with

anyone.

I guess feeling fully accepted by someone does funny things to the human brain.

It's a goddamn turn-on!

"Why won't you tell me?" I blink a few times.

"It isn't important, River."

I swim for the shore.

"Fuck, just listen, please."

I wade in the water for a while still facing away from him.

He lingers just behind me. "I got divorced. My parents weren't happy about it. I've never quite been the son they always wished they wanted, River. Never. I—I—I guess I thought you always knew that."

I spin around to face him. "How would I know that?"

He tosses his hands up in the air and makes a splash. "I don't know!"

All my life Eli seemed to have a great relationship with his parents. In my eyes at least. He never really talked about them. I never knew why.

"On my sixteenth birthday, I asked my father if I could speak to him about the things I was feeling and a—a—about you, River." He wipes a wet tuft of hair away from his forehead. "He hated our friendship. I mean he fucking *hated* it. It was at the point where he wanted to stop us from *ever* hanging out again."

The fact that it was so long ago doesn't make his words hurt any less.

"Why?" I snap.

He groans. "I don't know, River."

"Why, Eli!"

He takes eons to respond. "He thought something was wrong with you, River. That's what he said. He told my mother you were a freak and

didn't want me associated with you because..."

My eyes well up with tears.

I *loathe* that I do a fuck-ton of crying these days. I'm one giant vagina!

"Fuck." He goes silent and lifts a hand in my direction. "Do you see how you do this! I don't want to talk about this, River. At. All. But this is what you do, right? You demand the brutal truth. Well, there it is!"

I rein in the fury moving around me.

Eli disappears under the water for a few seconds then pops back up.

"Why did you continue to be my friend?" I question.

His eyes bulge out of his head. "Because I didn't care what people thought."

I gulp.

"Not my parents. Not the rest of my family. Not my stupid friends, *including* Adam."

I squint at the mention of Adam's name.

"I didn't care," he growls.

"I see."

"And when I told my father that, do you know what he did?" His voice lifts twenty thousand octaves.

"No."

"He shoved my head in a toilet, River."

I suck in a gasp. "I'm sorry."

"A *toilet*."

"I'm sorry." I look away from his big eyes, feeling guilty because it's apparent this man's been taking shots for me for years!

“After that incident, I kept everything to myself.”

“I’m *really* sorry, Eli.”

“Whatever, I don’t think about it. I’ve never gotten along with that asshole.”

“And even now—”

“And-even-now...” He nods harshly with every word he speaks. “And even now he still thinks he can control my life when it comes to money. But, guess what, River? I don’t need their money anymore. I am my own man. I have my own career which has allowed me the financial freedom to do whatever-the-fuck-I-want.”

The same freedom I’ve yet to attain for myself...

“If they knew we were like *this* now, River, a nuclear war would break out.”

I feel like I’ve been blasted in the face with pure manure. All these years Eli’s parents have smiled and welcomed me in their home. They’re good friends with my parents but clearly have never liked me no matter how much they smiled at me with their poisonous smiles. It was all bullshit. Total *fluff*.

“I didn’t realize they hated me so much.” My voice is weak and wobbly. I fix my eyes on a school of minnows that swim by.

“Come on, *please*, don’t do this crying shit. It isn’t you. You’re the toughest guy I know.” He swims closer and cups my cheek with his hand. “I’m free of them, River. I’m sorry but none of that stuff matters.” A small smile touches his lips. “Anyways, the problems didn’t stop when I got married. They just didn’t. Everything only got worse. It was terrible. I hated everything. I hated myself. I hated my life. At one point I thought I was beginning to hate her too.”

My thoughts run amuck in my head. “She divorced you?” I tip my chin back, wanting an answer.

“Yes, she left me. Happy now?”

I barely move my head in response.

He flicks his wet hair when a wave splashes him in the face. “I wanted her to. It made me feel less guilty.”

My eyes narrow.

“She can’t ever say it was my choice.” He smirks.

“I see.”

“I didn’t want to marry her, River, but I had to.” He gives me a hard stare.

“Adam said he hasn’t seen you. No one has.”

He wipes his face and exhales. “Would it be a stretch to imagine that no one has seen me, River, because I’ve been spending every waking second with you?”

About ten seconds pass before I answer. “No.”

He wiggles his brows. “Okay, then.”

“But I think Adam meant *before* we started doing this, Eli.”

“This?” His jaw ticks as he edges closer to me. “Adam and I have been drifting for years, River. Just because we’ve been best friends since we were ten years old doesn’t mean it’ll stick for the rest of our lives. Adam and I are different now. So different. And I just don’t have the time to fight battles with people I know I won’t win. I live my life. He lives his.”

“I understand.” I reach for him, throwing an arm over his shoulder and my legs around his hips. I absorb his breaths as they puff against my lips which burn a bit from the salt water.

He hums when I press my lips to his softly. “I know you think I’m something special, River.” He buries his face in my neck.

“I don’t.” I chuckle.

He pokes me in the side and huffs. “But, I’m fucked-up.”

“You aren’t.”

He swallows some water then spits it out. “It’s the most honest thing I’ve probably ever told you.”

I gaze into his eyes searching, hunting, wandering through his words.

“I can’t do this thing properly.” He nibbles on my shoulder. “But, I can do it with you. It’s *always* been this way. When I’m with you, I can just be myself and I don’t want to let it go, River.”

I squeeze my eyes shut allowing the confusion I feel to melt away.

He can talk like this, but he can’t speak of love?

“I understand,” I say.

I truly don’t.

“No, I don’t think you do.” He holds me tighter against his hard chest.

The water moves over us, frothy and cool.

“In Raziel’s Story, she sacrifices for others *a lot*,” he points out.

“Yes, she does.”

“So does Hajile.”

“He does.”

“It’s the only thing I don’t understand about Raziel’s path, River. Why she puts so many others before herself. It’s why she hurts so much. It’s why by the end of the *original* story, she’s tired and exhausted and so damaged she can barely *breathe* before she ends it all.”

“Because she *loves*, Eli.”

“So, love is pain? Is that what you’re saying?”

“Yesssss.”

He exhales sharply through his nose. “I refuse to believe that.”

I lift a shoulder.

“They tell you all this BULLSHIT, River, about love and life and

none of it makes any goddamn sense. I refuse to believe that love is pain and that life means putting up with trash and abuse from friends, family, bosses, coworkers...”

I tilt my head back to look at him.

“Abuse is abuse, River, doesn’t matter who it comes from.”

“Yes, I suppose you’re right.”

“My parents aren’t like yours.”

I had already told Eli about Abby’s surprise appearance at my apartment and how she handled being introduced to my new look. He didn’t seem shocked that she hadn’t flipped out as I’d assumed she would’ve.

My face scrunches.

He sucks his beautiful teeth. “And right now, my life is just me and you, and Wiley, and Benny.”

I chuckle at the mention of Benny, the cleaning lady...And it warms me so much that Eli has taken a liking to Wiley—my mutt.

He bites his lip. “I don’t have space for anyone or anything else.”

Well, who is Kelly6969?

I’m so confused!

With a deep breath, I smile. “What do you want out of life, Eli?”

“I want to be happy, River, same as you, I suppose.”

I nod.

“And you?” He drags his nose along mine. “What do you want?”

“Just someone to have sushi with once in a while.”

Laughing, he puts his lips to my shoulder. “You think I’ve saved you or some bullshit. And I’ve helped you with everything. Your book. This transition that you just won’t stop talking about...”

What the hell is that supposed to mean?

This man had trimmed my beard two days ago “correctly,” he’d said. He’d helped me pick out new clothes in Hugo Boss that fit better. We’d spent the day shopping pretty much for shit like cologne and shoes. I now have more than three pairs. And at Eli’s suggestion, we’d even stopped at the AMC on West 42nd Street to see *Love, Simon*.

And all throughout that day, I’d witnessed Eli put close to a hundred bucks in the paper cups and tins which belonged to the hobos who lived on the streets. He’d helped a woman who was struggling with her three toddlers get into a cab with all her bags. And he’d argued fiercely with a delicatessen owner who’d given an old man back less mula than he should’ve for a fucking slice of pepperoni pizza.

This man is the epitome of everything one day I hope to be.

He’s always been.

With a long huff, Eli keeps talking. “But, I don’t know if it’s entirely true.”

I’m lost for words at both of his *vague* statements.

“The book brought you back to me,” he says.

“Maybe.”

“It did.” He presses his forehead to mine. “And the truth is, you’ve saved me.”

“I don’t understand, Eli.”

With a smile, he gazes out at the horizon. “We should get sushi for dinner.”

“Yeah, sushi.”

“I know the perfect place, River Blue.”

“Sounds *awesome*.”

“CALL ME ISHMAEL.” I read from the dusty copy of Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* in my hands and grin. The famous line haunted my dreams as a teenager because I struggled to get through the novel that had been assigned by Mr. Schultz in the tenth grade. At the eleventh hour, Eli rented the movie. The one filmed in 1956 which starred Gregory Peck. It was good, but it didn’t answer all the questions Mr. Schultz had asked.

When is the movie ever better than the book, right?

Anyways, Eli ended up finishing the report for me and the result was an astounding A+. He always did have it like that. He was good at interpreting literature, finding the steak of the story and figuring out the writer’s intent from the very first page. I admired him for that then and even now.

Sighing, I close the book and spin around admiring the wide walkways which separate the tall bookshelves.

It’s so quiet in this place you’d think it’s full of dead bodies.

The occasional murmur can be heard and the clod of boots along the tile floors.

We’d ended up here after having California rolls and fresh Ahi tuna at a great place in Chinatown. It was all chill until we cracked open our fortune cookies to find they had the same note in them which read: **Reach out and you will find your soulmate’s hand.** I chalked it up to fate. Eli said it was crap. And that the restaurant had orchestrated the notes. And it was more than likely the *same* note was in all the cookies they gave out to patrons, in the hopes they’d spend more money on dessert.

The cynic in him didn’t fail to make me crack up laughing.

It’s almost four o’clock in the afternoon as we linger in the New York Public Library—the main branch in Bryant Park. We had coffee before making our way in here while standing outside in front of the two marble lion statues—Patience and Fortitude.

This is the second largest library in our great old America behind the Library of Congress in Washington D.C, and the third largest in the world. It’s rumored there are more than fifty-three million books and other items

contained in this beautiful one-hundred-and twenty-three-year-old landmark with its remarkable Beau-Arts architecture.

Considering I'm not much of a literary buff, I've always loved being here, especially with Eli, since it's always been his favorite place to hang out.

As teenagers, when all the guys were out playing football or baseball, Eli was here reading and writing, suggesting books for me to read, which I hardly ever did.

I did get through one though...

Running my fingers along the book spines, I trod down the empty row until I make it to the one he's standing in.

"I thought I'd find you in the romance section."

His eyes cut to mine. "And why would I be there?"

"I don't know." I bounce on my toes.

"I think that's more of your speed, isn't it?" He flicks the page harshly.

Slumping against the bookshelf, I watch him for a while as he reads a book I know he's read a million times already. It's *War & Peace* by Leo Tolstoy.

"Why do you keep reading that?"

He regards me with the same annoyance. "Because I like it."

"I see."

"You should try reading Tolstoy sometime, along with the other books I've been recommending to you for the last *fifteen* years."

I choke down a laugh. "I've gotten to some of them, just not all."

He runs a hand through his hair and turns another page. I admire his cool pose and how every now and again he takes his glasses off, thinks, then puts them back on.

"How do you expect to be a writer, River, if you don't *read*?"

I fold my arms across my chest. “Who said I’m a writer?”

He lowers his book.

“I just wrote one book—doesn’t make me a writer.”

“Okay, then. Maybe you *aren’t* a writer.”

Surprisingly, his statement offends me. I try to come up with something snarky to say back but I can’t pull my thoughts together as he watches me with irritation written all over his beautiful features.

“Not every writer reads.” I smile.

He doesn’t look at me, just keeps flicking through the pages. “I know you’ve said some dumb shit in your lifetime, River, but that by far is the stupidest thing you’ve ever said to me.” He flicks the page between his fingers with violence.

I lean against the shelf. “I did read one book you gave me.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, I did.”

“Which one?”

“Um, Lili Isle Elevenes’ autobiography *Man into Woman*.”

He nods. “Very good.”

“Why did you give me that?”

“River, we were teenagers. Can’t say I remember exactly why. I found it at the Brooklyn Book Festival and thought you could use it, I really don’t know.”

I nibble on my top lip. “Okay.”

Lili Isle Elevenes, better known as Lili Elbe, was a transgender woman born in Denmark in the late 1800’s and is one of the first identifiable recipients of sex reassignment surgery.

Lili was born Einar Wegner and had a very successful career as an

artist during that time period as did his wife Gerda. A replica of Gerda Wegener's painting *Lili Elbe*, dated 1928, hangs in the foyer of Eli's apartment.

It's a beautiful depiction of a blonde, Lili Elbe, with the biggest blue-gray eyes wearing the most enchanting expression as she looks off to her right.

After successfully transitioning in 1930, she legally changed her name to Lili. In 1931, Lili underwent surgeries, first for the removal of all her male sex organs, then for the implantation of a uterus and construction of a vagina, but it was all experimental at the time. Lili's body rejected the changes and she developed a horrible, life-threatening infection from which she died from three months after the surgery.

When I finished Lili Elbe's story, I did a bit of research and found out how her life had ended. I recall sitting in the middle of my bed crying like the world was ending. Because I couldn't understand how death could only result, instead of the fairytale ending I wanted so badly for her, when all she wanted to do was to live the life she dreamed of.

Eli is still reading. "Did the story make you *feel*?"

"Yes."

He closes the book in his hands.

I don't look away from the two emeralds gazing back at me. "I wanted to share it with you, but the book disappeared from my bedroom."

He laughs a little.

"Someone got their hands on it and likely tossed it away," I tell him.

"You're probably right, River." He smooths a hand over his jawline. "But it wouldn't have mattered because I'd already read it before I gave it to you."

My cheeks heat.

"I thought it could help you for what you were going through," he says.

I stare blankly at Eli.

He lowers his head to the floor for a beat and shrugs before he lifts it. “I don’t know, I guess so you could see you weren’t the only person like you.” His warm palm finds my cheek. “There are seven billion people in the world, River.” His brows arch. “I know you like to think you are *sooooo* unique and special, but, I’m sorry, you’re not. It looks like Einar/Lili, Robert/Alexis, Bruce/Caitlyn and Chastity/Chaz beat you to it.” He smiles without showing any of his perfect teeth.

And I want to knee him right in the balls.

“You’re an asshole.” I grin.

“I know.” He winks.

I pull him closer and plant a harsh kiss to his lips, tasting him. His hand slides up the back of my neck and holds me, controlling our motion as his tongue delves deeper into my mouth.

“Excuse me, sir, ma’am.” A woman’s voice interrupts the kiss.

Breathy, I pull away from Eli with hot lips and messy hair.

The woman’s thin brows are knotted together, and her arms are folded across her chest. She looks pissed as hell. She flinches when she realizes I’m donning a beard. I guess the long hair sent her down the wrong guessing road. She clears her throat, her face no less serious-looking than it was a minute ago. “Excuse me, *sirs*, but you can’t do that in here. *This is a library.*”

Eli struggles to hold back his laughter and lifts a hand, palm facing out toward the woman. “Yes, ma’am.” He buries his face in the crook of my neck.

“I mean it gentlemen, or I will have to call the authorities.”

“That’s not necessary, miss,” Eli says, then mumbles into my skin, “Let’s get out of here, *sir.*”

“Okay.” Laughing, I grab his hand and we dash for the doors.

HE HOVERS ABOVE ME.

Rippling muscles. Sweat. Pure hunger and *heat*.

I'm nestled against the soft white sheets. The pillows are everywhere, and the white down comforter has slipped from the bed and onto the floor.

We've been at this for a while...

My back aches. My breathing is labored. My hands shake.

I reach up to grip his bicep as he pounds mercilessly into me. Hips slamming into hips. All twelve of the defined muscles in his abs bunch and flex and that glorious cock of his slides in and out of my asshole, stretching me, filling me, making me scream his fuckin' name.

My knees are near my ears and my legs are over his shoulders as he holds me down. There's nothing but fury and lust in his eyes. His pecs jump and flex. He pounds into me more, more, more and I don't want him to stop.

He does.

I gape at him, then peer down at my sweaty stomach, loving the sight in front of me of his huge cock hanging hard and heavy between his powerful thighs. His balls are tight, and his beautiful mouth hangs open before he dips down and consumes me with a fierce, messy kiss.

The softness of his lips. The familiar taste of his tongue. The sensation of the stubble around his mouth against my lips.

I squeeze my eyes shut when he sinks back into me, fucking me hard, pounding me into the soft mattress like I stole his wallet.

He's so deep, there's a chance he could be saying hello to my small intestines.

I cry out. I moan. I scream to the heavens above!

His large hands move over the back of my thighs. He steadies himself above me and shudders when he comes deep in my asshole, letting out a savage sound that's sent Wiley scurrying from the bedroom.

He's still hard.

I absorb the sight of his gorgeous cock, shiny and veiny, dripping with cum. And I know there's no telling when this will end. If this man ever fucked his ex-wife the way he does me, it should be no surprise he's divorced.

He probably scared the shit out of her.

Broke her back. Put her in traction. Possibly ruptured her colon.

Just with the sheer weight of him. The power in his stroke. The size of his cock!

This man fucks like a possessed beast!

But it's always been this way with Eli...

He can do anything to me. And I mean *anything*, and I'd let him because it always feels so fucking good. This man could convince me to allow him to shove his dick up one of my nostrils and I'd probably say, "Bring it on, buster!"

"Fuck, River Blue." His dark hair is stuck to his forehead before he brushes it away. "God, I love fucking you."

My vision clears just as my smile cracks right in half.

I thought I'd heard, "I fucking love you."

But, nope.

He runs his hands over my thighs, digging into it a bit with his eager fingers. "Let me see that fat clit of yours." He runs his thumb over it, pressing, pinching. The sensation coaxes a groan from me. Grabbing me by the waist savagely, he yanks me closer to him.

A moan rattles my chest when his head of dark messy hair disappears between my thighs, sucking, licking and teasing my clit. Being so tender and so rough. His forest greens pin me, blinking slowly as he takes the entire thing in his mouth and sucks on it slow like he's giving me a blow job. It takes me less than a minute to come. And I'm soaking the sheets and his face with all of me.

Eli laughs a big laugh, wipes his face and pushes up to his knees.

I wrap my hand around his cock, fisting it from root to tip, earning a moan from him, then take it deep in my mouth. I revel in the sensation of the thick hot head of it sliding past my lips and snaking down my throat. The salty taste of precum slicks my tongue as my mouth slides up and down along his length.

“Fuck.” His deep voice crawls into my ears, driving my effort on.

I suck him off, flicking my tongue over the swollen head of his cock before I draw him in deeper until he hits the back of my throat forcing me to gag.

“I don’t know if you want to drain my balls or suck this thing clean off of me and run away with it.” It’s a running joke. One that’s still funny between us.

Eli knows I *adore* his cock.

I laugh and the vibration that hits his balls makes him swell even more. His cock twitches hard and he groans helplessly. At the same time, he steals his dick away from me leaving me feeling bereft and ripped off.

He plants a vicious kiss to my lips and pulls me close. I sink into the sensation of his hands all over me. One little peek I manage between the tongue dance and a tiny smile skitters its way across my lips when I look at our bodies pressed together.

I have chest hair and muscular pecs, just the way he does.

I have carved abs covered in sparse hair, just the way he does.

I have closely trimmed hair on my face, just the way he does, only because he’s long overdue for a shave.

I have everything this man has, except...

“What do you want from me?” I suck his top lip into my mouth and peer into his beautiful jungle green marbles as wetness seeps out of me.

If there’s one thing that’s only reaffirmed itself in my mind throughout this journey, it’s that sexuality, sexual preferences and gender don’t fit in a box. And as you know, I *hate* labels. We should be free to be

whoever we want to be and like what we like without fear of being labeled. Besides, how I fuck my boyfriend—if that's who Eli is to me now—and what part of my body I do it with is no one's *motherfucking* goddamn business.

He presses his forehead to mine.

Nose to nose. Lips to lips. Heart to fucking heart.

“What do you like?” I drag my fingers over his shoulder.

“Anything you offer me, River Blue.”

We ease down to the mess of twisted white sheets and pillows.

I place my hand on his hard abs, feeling the warmth of his sweaty skin against the inside of my palm. Biting back a loud moan, I slide down on his length, resisting the urge to moan even more as it drags along my walls, teasing them and forcing them to quiver. I'm perfectly stuffed with cock.

With my hand planted on his shoulder and a few of my fingers shoved into his mouth, I ride him without mercy like a dick fiend.

His long lashes flutter and a hiss slips from his lips.

I rise and fall on the fat monster, taking every inch of it in.

He ruts his hips to meet my movement and soon we're both coming, kissing and moaning, screaming and panting each other's names as my pussy is filled with his cum.

I collapse on top of him, depleted. Exhausted. Fucking dead.

We lie there for a while just breathing, recovering. I rest on my stomach facing away from him, staring at the red brick wall.

Eli's thick fingers drag along my spine. “I'm ready to settle down, River Blue, if you are.”

My brows dip down to my nose.

I don't respond. I don't ask what it means. I remain quiet.

He pulls the sheet up, covering us, and when I do decide to face him, he's already asleep.

Exhaling, I make myself more comfortable and think about my future.

The buzzing on the nightstand catches my attention.

Looking around before I do, I snatch up Eli's phone and glare at the faceplate.

**Kelly6969: I still love you. Please don't stand me up tomorrow.
Central Park, Fifth Avenue side, five o'clock, as you promised.**

I rest the phone back down, feeling like I've just been served up a dinner of dead cat. After my regularly scheduled chat with Doctor Beorsalve tomorrow, I have a fuck-ton of crap to do and places to be.

But, it's clear I'm not the only one who has appointments...

CHAPTER NINE

I'M SURROUNDED BY CHICKENS.

Or more specifically, Bantam hens.

They like to fly, and they *love* to shit.

My phone buzzes for the fifty-eighth time. I ignore it and go back to finishing the letter Barry had asked me to type in response to his wife's demands for more child support.

Blythe scurries across the room, chasing one of the hens. Feathers are everywhere, and white droplets of shit decorate the floor in spots.

Barry makes his way over to me, holding his nose. He opens his mouth to speak but nothing comes out.

God, what in the hell is going on?

Blythe and the lighting assistant manage to rustle together the chickens and get a few shots they seem satisfied with.

Today marks the first day of September, which means I've successfully been dodging everyone in my family, except Abby for over a month. I still haven't confronted my father. I've spoken to him over the phone numerous times though, using every excuse under the ozone layer for not going by Roth Jewelers to see him.

So far, I've had the flu, explosive diarrhea, pink eye, a slipped disc, the common cold, poison ivy, poison oak *and* the shingles. There's no way he believes me by now and honestly, I'm running out of afflictions.

I get to the end of the letter.

Barry is still standing in front of me pinching his nostrils. His eyes are red, and his white hair is everywhere making him look more like Doc from Back to the Future than an advertising executive.

I wait for him to speak.

But instead, he explodes.

Sneeze. Sneeze. Sneeze.

He points at me.

Sneeze. Sneeze. Sneeze.

“Before you finish that letter, I want you to add this line at the bottom.”

Sneeze. Sneeze. Sneeze.

“Okay,” I say, keeping my hands on the keyboard.

“You’re.” *Sneeze.* “A.” *Sneeze.* “Super.” *Sneeze.* “Cunt.” *Sneeze.*

“Barry, I cannot write that. This document is going to her lawyer.”

“I don’t care,” he snaps. “In all capital letters!”

“Fine.” I type the words quickly and click print.

This is so not what I went to university for...

My phone, which has been buzzing all morning vibrates even more, then a few calls come in. Barry barks out more demands. The UPS man strolls in with a package. Then my desk phone starts ringing off the hook and the sound of R.E.M’s “Man on the Moon” playing in this large room seems to have gotten louder in the last few minutes.

Snatching up my cellphone, I shut it off then toss it across my desk.

I work feverishly for the next hour, doing each task as quickly and efficiently as I can. When I finish typing up an office supply order form and wiring the alimony Barry pays his ex-wife each month, it’s almost five o’clock.

When I’m done, I push to my feet and sling my bag over my shoulder.

For a beat, I stare at the copy of the re-edited version of Raziel’s Story and the personalized handwritten letter on the front of it from Eli. The note reads: **If this is your one and only work ever, River Blue, I’m glad you have trusted me with it to make it better. And I know you don’t want to believe it, but this story healed both you, and me. It has given me**

courage. Yours truly, Eli.

Smoothing my finger over his perfect script handwriting, I smile.

And everything I thought I wanted to do with this story, now that I have it in my hands, feeling how much love flows around on these pages...All I want to do is press it to my chest and keep it safe. Who knew that after all this work, I wouldn't want to share Raziel's Story with the world and have it published. For some reason, it feels personal, private...like a lovechild. And I want it to stay my baby.

I'd awoken this morning early just before the sun peeked over the horizon. Eli's phone kept blowing up with text messages from Kelly6969. I ignored them. I made a healthy breakfast of egg white and green pepper fajitas. It was all very domesticated—the two of us in the kitchen cooking, sipping freshly-brewed coffee and reading the New York Times in between.

I suppose it's all *unspoken*, like everything else, but...

Eli and I pretty much live together. We sleep together. Shower together. Eat together. We've spent the entire summer together. We're like a real couple. But something is missing...

My boots hit the shiny wooden floor and with each step my stomach sinks further and further into Hell, wondering what exactly comes next.

Blythe's eyes go wide when I fly past her. "Where are you going, River? Are you coming back? Barry and I are going for drinks later at a spot in Little Italy."

I smirk. "No, you guys go ahead without me. I have so much to do."

"Oh, yeah, okay no problem."

"I'll see you tomorrow then."

"Yeah, I'll see you tomorrow." I bound down the stairs and through the heavy metal door. When I hit the sidewalk, the humidity slathers me, thick and hot like my angry thoughts.

With a high-pitched whistle, I hail a cab. One pulls up almost immediately.

I clamber inside.

“Where to, sir?” The cabbie grins.

With hot ears, tears are already swimming in my eyes.

To find out if the boy I've loved my entire life loves me at all... To see if he's still the one. To discover why he doesn't feel the same as I do. To get an answer for why he hasn't said those three little words I'm desperate for.

Fuck.

I'm quickly roller-skating into stalker territory.

But it doesn't stop me.

I stalk on.

“Sir.” The cabbie repeats the words, yanking me from my ruminating.

“Central Park.”

“You got it!” He hits the gas.

His last three words have me thinking...What *exactly* do I have?

~

A soft peach falls over the canopies of maple trees which line Central Park this time of day as the sun sets. I amble along taking in the picturesque view. Joggers and cyclists move past me, leaving a warm, pollinated breeze in their wake. Children play on the grass while their parents observe them. Businessmen talk on their cellphones. A man playing the drums has a small gathering of people in front of him off to my left. And the old couple I pass who are sitting together on a bench toss me a wave.

It's pleasant here. A place I'd probably convince Eli to come after he's had a long day at work. Somewhere we could just talk and be.

The birdsong above me, forces me to shut my eyes.

I breathe and keep walking until I come to a shaded area of the park. My feet remained glued to the stone beneath me and goose bumps break out

all over my skin. Like the stalker I am, I dip behind a massive magnolia tree and try my best to control my rapidly deteriorating demeanor. And I've got the works—shaky hands, trembling lips, watery eyes, pounding fucking heart. I feel like I'm being sent to the guillotine!

Breathe. Breathe. Breathe.

Lurking, I peek around the wide trunk of the tree.

Two humans.

Standing quite a distance apart like strangers.

Eli.

And a man. A blond. Tall and wearing a suit. Eyes like a Yorkshire terrier's.

"I'm sorry, I can't do this anymore." Eli's deep voice is unmistakable.

It seems I've caught the tail end of their chat.

Fuck.

I'm late.

"I just thought maybe you'd give this one more chance," the blond says.

"No, it's over. I've moved on. I'm sorry. We're done."

Done?

The blond snuffles. "Okay, well, I guess we don't have anything more to talk about."

Footsteps. So many footsteps as if he's walking away. But more footsteps are headed in my direction. Maneuvering around the tree, I go the wrong way, then BOOM, Eli is standing right in front of me, burning into me with those green lasers of his.

I'm covered in sweat.

His mouth opens to say something.

Neither of us speak, just stare.

“*River.*” He drags his fingers through his hair and fists a huge tuft of it.

I observe the anger smeared all over his face like shit *and* the shock and the sorrow.

Yes, I’m a stalker. Yes, I’ve monumentally invaded your privacy. But, so what! You lied!

The fury rushes through me like a storm. I point a finger in the direction of the blond who’s almost out of sight. “Is that Kelly6969!”

“What?” His entire face locks up tight.

“Him!” I jab my finger in the air, nearly hysterical. “Is that Kelly6969!”

“*River, please* listen to me.” He puts his hands together in prayer.

“Who is that!”

“Kelly.” He wipes the sweat from his forehead and steps toward me as I move away.

“Kelly6969?”

“Yes.”

A tear slips from my left eye and I make no effort to wipe it away. “He said he loves you. And that he—he—he misses you.”

Eli nods.

I back away some more.

“We had a thing, *River.*”

I blink about a million times.

A thing?

“But it’s over,” he says.

I blink about a trillion more times. More tears. More trembling. More *agony*.

I don't understand!

“You’re—You’re—You’re into men?” My question is a weak rasp from my mouth.

He mutters something beneath his breath as he scans the park. I’m quite aware I’m making a scene, but I don’t give a fuck.

“You’re gay?” I sniffle some more.

“WELL, ISN’T IT FUCKING OBVIOUS!” He lifts a hand in my direction.

I take a few seconds to process his words. “I—I—I guess it is.”

He spins away from me. I examine the dry leaves on the ground as they skitter across the stone with the breeze. When I elevate my head and he whirls around, the expression on his face almost causes my heart to stop dead in my chest.

He looks beyond exhausted and just *sad*.

“I’m so—” I lower my head, attempting to gather my thoughts, then lift it.

His minty greens shine. “You—”

“I’m sorry, Eli. But why didn’t you tell me?” My tone is pitiful.

“I didn’t think I had to, River!” He looks at me like I must be the dumbest dude in Manhattan right now. *Maybe I am!* “And besides you’ve been so—so—so into *yourself* and your *transition* and your *book* that you’ve never once asked about what might be going on in my life!”

“I’m sorry, but I tried—”

“Oh, you did?”

“Yes, I did.”

I really did!

He exhales sharply and kicks a rock on the ground.

“It doesn’t matter, Eli.”

“Why would it?” His laugh is high-pitched as he walks a short distance away from me.

I fold my arms across my chest, attempting to massage away the goose bumps along my arm that are there which makes no sense because I’m sweating like a hog! “Is Kelly6969 the reason you don’t love me?”

He freezes. “You’ve got to be fucking kidding me?”

I wipe the tears from my cheeks, hating that he’s *deflecting* once again!

His dress shoes hit the ground hard as he marches back in my direction, getting in my face. “That was a big fuckin’ joke, wasn’t it?”

I almost say something. I open my mouth. But nothing but hot air leaves it.

He eyeballs me. “River, that was a joke, right?”

A tear runs down my cheek, thick, hot and lonely, waiting for all the rest to join it.

He bobs his head, furious. “A joke, RIGHT!”

The boom in his voice pisses me off. I remain silent only to aggravate him even more and back away.

He marches toward me putting his thick finger in my face. “You’re so blind, River. You’re so fucking blind. You’ve allowed this whole transition to stop you from seeing the world around you. You are *more* than this. You are a person first before you decide which sex you want to live it as, or, how you want to live your life.”

“You don’t think I know that!” My jaw is tight.

“You’re *supposed* to be getting your shit together so that we can have a life.”

Clearly, I missed the breaking news...

A life together?

“I am.” I suck in more air.

“Are you?”

I nod weakly.

“You’re *supposed* to be putting your two degrees to good use.” He rubs a hand over his jaw. “You’re *supposed* to be telling your family about your decision and not skulking around New York City beneath the cover of a baseball cap, or a black hoodie all the time in one-hundred-degree temperatures!”

“Oh, fuck you, Eli! You’re no different than me! Who have you to—”

He digs a finger into the middle of his chest. “I told my father I’m gay, River. I told my father I’m with you. I told my father *everything!*”

I’m crumbling, crumbling, so bad, like my aunt Esther’s dry rugelach.

Eli stands in front of me, tall. His big nose tipped high and his chin *strong*.

Courage.

Rage.

Pride.

This man is everything I wish I’d someday be.

Like I said before...

“You know the part in Raziel’s Story when everyone she cares about turns their backs on her because of who she’s decided to love and it all contributes to her irreversible insanity.” He brushes his hair away from his sweaty forehead.

“Yes.”

“Well, *that* won’t be my story, River. And it *won’t* be yours. Fuck

‘em!”

I’m lost for words.

“But it has been your story, hasn’t it?” His lips are pressed tight.

“No.”

His face twists into the most tormented expression. “That entire-fucking-story is *your* story, River.”

I shake my head. “No, no, no, no, no. It isn’t.”

He cocks his head to the side. “It is, River. I knew the second I cracked open those pages that-was-*your*-story. A story within a story.”

“It isn’t.” My words are a confused plea.

“Well, it goes to say I HATED the way it ended. I *fucking* hated it.”

I swallow back my tears.

“And Hajile!” With his yelling, spittle flies from his mouth.

“Yes.”

“You wrote in the original story that he never loved Raziel.”

I sniffle. “Yeah, so.”

He cranes his neck to the sky. “Dude, you can’t be this fucking self-absorbed?”

Huh?

“What does that have to do with anything?” It’s a struggle for me to keep my voice down.

He comes closer. “Hajile, are you *kidding* me?”

I stare at him completely mystified.

“Hajile.” He laughs. “Elijah spelled fucking backward.”

I almost choke.

“Do you even realize what you write, River!”

I suppose I don't...

A breath rushes from me like it's my last. He cannot avoid answering my questions. Not anymore. I-want-straight-fucking-answers! “Kelly6969—” I fiddle with my hands.

“I don't want to talk about Kelly, River.”

“Well, I DO!”

A weird frustrated noise leaves him. “Kelly and I have been over for *months*. It was all before how we are now. *Way* before us, River.” His eyes turn into the green wild. “It's only been me and you, just like I told you, just the way it's always been.”

“Is Kelly6969 the reason?”

Eli's eyes narrow. “The reason for what?”

“The reason you can't *tell* me you love me?”

“I've been trying to tell you I love you my whole fucking LIFE, River Blue!” He comes closer with gorgeous narrowed eyes that make me feel like I'm the only man in the world. “That night in the den, I thought you—you—you understood.” He pins me with his eyes.

I shake my head from side to side furiously.

God, I'm stupid.

“Weren't you *listening*?” His voice is pained.

“I did but I didn't know what was *real* and what was the *story*.”

“Seems to be a common theme around here, huh?”

“I—I wasn't sure. I was confused. Everything you were saying, Eli, was so—”

“All of it was *real*, River.” He tosses an arm up in the air. “I've been in love with you my-entire-LIFE!”

This isn't the way I imagined it. I thought there'd be more romance. Not screaming and swear words and lots and lots of tears.

“When I told you I was getting married you acted as though you didn't give a shit...One word from you, River. Just-one-word and I wouldn't have done it. But, I guess you were dealing with your own mess.” He tosses his arms up in the air, genuinely looking offended. “And I tried to tell you a million times over the years that I felt I was gay, River, but I couldn't. I just couldn't.”

We've been standing here for so long that the park has emptied of most of the people and night is about ten minutes from taking over the city.

“I'm sorry.” It's the only thing I can say to Eli right at this moment. “When did you tell your father that—” I wipe my cheeks.

“This morning,” he growls. “I told him this morning. And do you know what happened, River?”

“What?”

“He died!”

I cover my mouth with my hand. “I'm sorry.”

He makes no attempt to wipe the wetness from his cheeks. “Yeah, he died, *this* morning. I've been trying to call you all fucking day. ALL DAY!”

Shit.

The missed calls.

“You can't answer my phone calls, but you can stalk me here to the park.”

“I'm sorry.”

He spears his fingers into his thick, dark strands making them messy, then flicks his hand like royalty. “You know what, just get away from me.”

His words shove me backward and I almost fall.

“Just go.” The tears leave his eyes one behind the other until he's

weeping.

“Eli.” I reach a hand out.

“Get the fuck away from me.” He knocks it away.

Rejection. Disgust. Disappointment.

I failed. Massively.

I do as he wishes.

My walk turns into a jog, which morphs into a full-on Tom Cruise sprint!

Ignoring the sound of Eli screaming my name and the pounding of his shoes against the pavement, I gun it through the park gates like a quarter horse only to find myself barreling down East 72nd Street with a face covered in tears.

~

I slow to a walk and stop when I make it in front of a random outlet store on a quiet, empty street. Unsure of how long I’ve been walking, I check my watch and discover that I’ve been wandering the city for a half hour.

Most of the stores around me are closed and the traffic is a little lighter.

I face the window beneath the overhead lighting. And I swear I glow in the glass. I stand straighter, taller, bigger and look at myself and my messy man-bun. My blue eyes are sad and wet, but they’re bright. More full of life than they’ve probably ever been.

“You got any change, man?” a gravelly female voice asks.

I spin around to face a woman who’s pushing a cart that’s overloaded with more shit than a junkyard could ever be. Searching my pockets, all I find is a fifty. Her eyes widen. I’m too exhausted to search for something smaller. I shove it in her hand and slump against the glass window.

“Thank you, man. God bless you.”

“Yeah, sure, anytime.”

After letting out a deep breath, I stand straighter.

“What. The. Fuck.” A familiar voice rings in my ears.

Without moving my feet, I twist my body slightly around in the direction of the deep voice. But he’s already on me, in my face, crowding me, all up in my shit, examining me.

“What the fuck did you do to yourself?” Adam’s face is in mine.

“Aunty River!” Ariel and Nathan call out to me, excited.

I make my best attempt to smile but it falters when they see my face.

Shit.

“I cannot believe you’ve done this.” Adam reaches up to touch my cheek.

I knock his hand away.

He shakes his head and mutters Hebrew...something about me trembling before God and more kaka. “You’ve lost your fucking mind, River. You’ve really gone and done it this time.” His forehead is shiny with sweat. “What the hell is going on with you?”

My insides are on fire.

Adam’s wife, Chaya, stands off in the distance, holding the two boys to her side. Her hand covers her mouth as she regards me as if she’s just seen a two-headed duck-billed platypus.

“Are you trying to kill our father?” Adam points a finger at me as his eyes narrow.

“No.” I stand straighter, taller, bigger and *face him*.

He gets all up in my grill. His brown eyes are wild as fuck.

“I just want to live my life, Adam.”

“You’re just like that bastard, Eli. I heard this morning he’s gay.”

I nod a few times. “Yeah, and so what!”

“He killed his father. He killed the goddamn rabbi! This nonsense has to stop.” He comes closer and closer. “I demand you go home and fix yourself, River.”

“How?” An angry laugh rips from me. “Shave? It’ll only grow back.”

“I don’t care. Do *something*, River! This isn’t right!”

“No.”

“No?” His jaw twitches and his ears perk as if he doesn’t understand fucking English.

“No. I’m not *hurting* anyone, Adam. I just want to live my life. You act as if I’m about to commit mass murder or blow up a goddamn building. I’m not hurting a soul!”

“You are hurting our family by doing this, River.” His face twists like he smells shit. “Is it true that you and Eli are a *couple*?”

“Yes, it’s true.”

I think.

“I will never accept this.” He starts to walk away.

“You’re such a fucking hypocrite!”

He spins around and almost burns me alive with the fire in his eyes.

I point a finger at him, then at Chaya. “You’re the one doing the *real* damage.”

“Whattttt?” He sucks in all the air in his lungs just like a dragon does right before they’re about to go into destruction mode.

I jut my chin out in his direction. “I’m not the one cheating on my *wife*.”

There.

I said it.

Take that. Take that. Take that.

Pure doomsday horror dances across Chaya's face, then a river of tears follow.

Adam charges me like a bull and when his head crashes into my midsection, I'm slammed into the storefront behind me.

Chaya shrieks and the boys cry.

One. Two. Three punches Adam lands to my ribs with brute force.

He backs away in shock at himself, as if he can't believe what he'd just done. With a black fury I swear I've summoned straight from the pits of Hell, I crouch down and charge into him WWF-style. We crash into the side of a parked car, denting it and breaking the window.

D...R...A....M....A.

And we're going at it like Larry Holmes and Ken Norton did in 1978. Only this fight will be just *one* round.

Duck and move. Move and duck.

Punches. Jabs. Uppercuts. When I get *in* past his left hook, I bite Adam's ear almost clean off the side of his head. He tackles me to the ground and knees me in the ribs. I think I hear and *feel* every single one of them crack. By some miracle, I wriggle out of his hold, just the way he'd taught me over all the years of him pounding on me and get to my feet.

I land a few punches, dazing him. "Come on you, motherfucker."

"You want me to fight you like you're a man?"

Isn't that what you've always done?

"Then, I'll be serving you up one thorough cut-ass right on these New York City streets."

"Fuck you."

Adam smiles showing me a mouthful of blood which he sends right for my face, blinding me with pure grossness, then pounces. I take a few

more punches to the stomach. They leave me starved for air, choking, heaving and trying to restart my lungs to make them work again. Then he's back to wailing on me with his big fat fist, beating the piss out of me, like he *really* wants me to die.

“Adam, STOP!” Chaya shrieks.

This sonofabitch doesn't hold back an ounce of rage.

All I see is bloody, split knuckles before I fall to the concrete.

Adam straddles me. He balls up his fists, but before they connect with my face once more, he's gone....

Like gone, gone.

Knocked clean off his knees by some collide and tackle move.

His entire body has left the ground.

Completely non-ambulatory, I almost slip into unconsciousness, but I force my teary eyes to stay open.

Grunting. Swearing. The impact of bone on flesh.

“You, motherfucker! If you believe you know the word of God and believe he permits you to treat other human beings like shit because they're not the same as you, because they don't *believe* the same as you, then tell him come the fuck down from the sky and deliver the message himself!”

The big form is familiar as it looms over Adam's body, delivering blow after blow after blow. And then it's over just as fast as it starts.

Children whimpering. Sirens blaring. Chaya sobbing.

“Nothing you're doing is right! If you don't like the way I live my life...If you don't like the way River lives his life...THEN STAY THE FUCK OUT OF IT!” Eli stands, looming over Adam with a face like granite and a dress shirt that looks like it took a walk through the shredder. “Just so you know, the God I believe in is *kind*, and *just*, and has love for *all*, you bastard.” He kicks Adam in the stomach once for good measure before he's done.

I writhe on the hard concrete, attempting to get myself upright.

“We need to get out of here.” Hoisting me up from the ground, Eli tucks me into his side, assisting me as I hobble down the sidewalk. When we make it to the end, he shoves me into a bright yellow getaway vehicle...*away* from the scene of the crime.

“What the fuck just happened to you guys, man?” The cabbie glances behind him at us, horrified.

“Nothing, please just drive. It’s 64 Upper East Side,” Eli instructs.

“I kicked his ass, didn’t I?” Managing a weak laugh, I lean my bloody face against the door, staining it with my pain.

“You kicked his ass, but I’d fucking *end* him.” Eli tosses the cabbie a one-hundred-dollar bill. “I’ll fucking *end* him if he *ever* touches you again in this life, River.”

I chuckle a little more, tasting coppery blood on my tongue. “Where are we going?” My question comes out as an agonizing moan.

“Home.” Eli presses his lips to my temple. “We’re going *home*, River Blue.”

CHAPTER TEN

THE DARK HOURS...

It's three o'clock in the morning and I'm sitting on the toilet lid in my white boxer briefs. An angry bruise the color of an eggplant encircles my left eye and a swollen bottom lip makes me look less than stellar right now.

Wiley is curled up on the floor a few feet away and "Haunting" by Halsey sounds from the iPod dock on the vanity.

I lift the ice pack to my eye, loving the coolness of it against my skin.

The doctor who'd just left told me I didn't have a concussion.

Lucky me.

He said nothing about what had happened to my soul a few hours ago.

Truth is, it broke just a little, but nothing that can't be mended.

I huff.

John Trudell once said, "I am just a human being trying to make it in a world that is rapidly losing it's understanding of being human." I've always loved the quote. In fact, I scribbled it at the bottom of the letter I wrote to Adam a moment ago and had Eli put in the mail chute.

Hopefully, one day Adam reads it.

Hopefully, he forgives me for breaking his nose.

Because, I forgive him for treating me like shit my entire life.

Eli appears in the doorway. His dark hair is mussed, and the remarkable color of his eyes is subdued. He's shirtless and wearing a pair a lounge pants, holding another ice pack in his hand.

We exchange knowing glances and I don't know how I could've been so oblivious to how this man feels about me, now or even way back then. Eli's actions should've told me everything. Because, love comes in many forms, and sometimes it comes in whispers along with tender, *monumental*

gestures and a big faithful heart.

And it never escapes me that my whole life, in everything I did, even when I was quiet, when my words were never spoken aloud, only *Eli* had ever heard them.

Only him.

He strolls in my direction, drops down to his knees in front of me and places it to the bruised apple of my cheek. “Are you okay?”

“Yes.” Chuckling, I lean into his chest.

“Good.”

Thing is, I see a place for myself in this world.

With the exception of a few assholes, it isn’t so bad.

I’m in love. *So* in love.

I can finally be me.

I don’t have to lie anymore.

And I see the future...when I hadn’t before.

No more magic mirrors.

No more judgments.

No more self-hate.

No more *pain*.

“I love you, Eli.”

He blinks his lucid greens. “I love you more, River Blue.”

And just like in Raziél’s Story, there’s a happy ending in mine.

“Who gives a fuck what they think, River.” His lips touch my lips.

I kiss him back hard, desperate and deep. “Yeah, who gives a fuck what they think.”

Eli pulls me in closer against his chest, allowing me to feel his heartbeat and how it syncs with mine.

So beautiful. So perfect. So mine.

And I wouldn't give him up for anyfuckingthing.

Hold on to him forever, River...

EPILOGUE

Two Years Later

AFTER HUGE BLOCKS OF time go by, you're guaranteed to be full of regret.

It's either the regret for doing something you wish you hadn't and pray you could take back, rewind time and somehow make it disappear. *Or*, you regret not doing something you had done, *sooner*.

And these days, I lean so much toward the latter.

I hold my warm teacup between my hands and gaze out the window at the city I've called home my entire life. And although I do miss Brooklyn, I love living in Manhattan full-time. I'd moved out of my apartment and into Eli's swankier address. I practically already lived there anyhow.

The morning sun is aglow, and the sky is clear.

Life has changed.

We've been married for almost two years now.

Eli and I had the ceremony in a LGBTQ-friendly synagogue two weeks after we buried his father. In attendance were Abby, Blythe and Tosh. After that we settled into a quiet, normal life.

Eli went back to work and so did I.

I clutch my cup of tea close to my chest and inhale the minty aroma of it.

Adam didn't speak to me for quite some time after that infamous fight but after his nose healed and his wife filed for divorce, he crept his way back into our lives. While he's no longer best friends with Eli, he is still my brother. Adam apologized and promised he'd try his best to accept me, and he has...*slowly*.

Eli's family on the other hand have completely cut ties with him.

Firstly, for coming out as gay and secondly for marrying me. So, that's that in a top hat.

Eli doesn't speak much about it. He knew what the repercussions would be if he were to pursue what he really wanted in life. And he was okay with that. He had his closure long before he sent his father into cardiac arrest that summer day two years ago.

“Good morning, Professor Roth.” The sleepy-looking students mumble their standard greeting simultaneously.

It's Monday—the hardest day of the week for most of them who are usually still recovering from a long weekend of studying or partying. They have my sympathy on both fronts.

“Good morning.” I step away from the door as they all filter in like zombies.

The first time I gathered up the courage to see Benjamin, it was a rainy day and the temperature had dropped so low that there was frost on all the windows. Abby made us ginger tea and sat to the table next to me, holding onto my hand so tight it was almost turning purple. Abby shook as badly as I did that day, but she kept our hands under the table so no one was the wiser. I'll forever love my mother for that small kindness.

At first, Benjamin refused to look at me. But gradually he got used to how I appear now. He made me promise I'd never cut my hair, to which I obliged, especially since I never plan to.

The tittering which fills my classroom yanks me back to the present.

Looking around, I smile when I see each seat and the individual who occupies it. All human. All with a different story to tell of how they came to be who they are.

Unique. Different. Special.

I jump when Ari squirms and pushes his feet up beneath my rib cage reminding me he's due to come out in less than twelve weeks.

You can imagine the looks I first got when people noticed my big stomach.

Most just thought I was fat, but of course others knew I was with child.

Running a hand over my large belly, I make my way over to my desk and set my cup down.

I've been teaching sociology at NYU for close to two years now.

I'd finally landed my first *real* job which I love.

The students are an interesting mixture of very eclectic people, the faculty is exceptional, and the campus thrives with individuals who identify rather *loudly* as being part of the LGBTQ community.

I get the overenthusiastic person every now and again who wants to be my bestie because they have a pressing desire to know everything about what being a transgender person means. Or, the asshole who's decided they don't like me before we even meet, but mostly, people are decent human beings.

"What are we discussing today, Professor Roth?" Avery, my most talkative student asks.

"We are discussing gender stereotypes in a relationship," I tell them all.

Avery smiles.

I tip my head forward and look each of them in the eye. "So, is it okay for a boy to cry?"

The discussion begins...

My phone buzzes.

Eli: Sushi tonight?

He doesn't mean it. Not *exactly* anyways.

I laugh out loud, mostly because Eli knows that just to be on the safe side, I choose not to eat sushi. But the question always makes my heart speed up a little since I'd told him that *one* time that having someone to go for sushi with was all I really wanted out of life.

Clearly, he hasn't forgotten. He *never* forgets.

So these days, I *watch* Eli eat sushi while I elect to have something else like fish.

Me: Of course.

Eli: Good, I'll pick you up after your last class, River Blue.

Me: Sounds awesome.

Placing the phone back down on my desk, I grimace a little when I think about going out tonight. I think about the fake smiles, odd looks and the vicious whispers I so often get. I wonder if I want to endure them tonight along with considering the possibility of Eli getting into a fist fight with some rando.

The world is changing and learning to accept things they cannot fully understand, but, not fast enough.

After considering it, I decide there's no way I'll let people who feel they have the right to judge me stop me from enjoying crispy fried flounder. A smile spreads across my cheeks when I think about how good it tastes. I stand straighter, taller, bigger and face my classroom full of students—the future. Listening to their animated banter, my thoughts drift...

I'm in love with my life, Eli, and our baby boy, Ari, who is growing in my belly.

Our family.

The thought that we plan to have more children warms me.

I let out a deep breath.

People don't have to understand but they *will* respect our decision to live our lives the way we want. After all, isn't that what each of us wants for ourselves?

And besides, just like Eli has always said...

Who gives a fuck what they think.

-THE END-

Thank you so much for reading River's story!

If you have time to leave an honest review on Amazon or Goodreads, it would be greatly appreciated!

Keep scrolling for a bonus excerpt of His Mistress; Her Lover!

HIS MISTRESS; HER LOVER



THE LAS VEGAS CHRONICLES

A LGBTQ Romance Novel

by:

Savannah Blue

CHAPTER ONE

Las Vegas, Nevada

Luciana

IT'S OFFICIAL.

I'm a *fuckin'* statistic.

I'm now one of *them*.

Inhaling sharply, I wipe the sweat from my brow. My gaze bounces between the shiny black Bentley Continental GT coupe being lowered in my driveway and the clipboard in front of me.

It's sweltering out here. My insides are boiling and for more reasons than just the July heat. I bite into my bottom lip and my jaw clenches so tight I think my teeth are shifting out of place.

My watch tells me it's just getting up to lunch time. I'm not usually home at this hour. I'd only popped back in because I'd forgotten my gym bag and Lord knows I can't miss my weekly spin classes with Javier who's an angrier and prettier version of Richard Simmons.

After collecting my gym crap, I'd planned to head right back out. But it was impossible since a tractor trailer was reversing in our driveway delivering a *gift*.

A headache is already clawing at the insides of my skull and the rest of the work day I know I have ahead of me isn't making me feel any better. With a shaky hand, I reach into the pants pocket of my suit and pull out a bottle of acetaminophen. I pop the top, put it to my mouth and dump a few of them in like they're candies.

Crunch. Crunch. Crunch.

I chew, ignoring the disgusting chalky taste which coats my tongue.

Crunch. Crunch. Crunch.

I watch the men work swiftly. My eyes focus on the big bow placed on top of the vehicle. Red. Bright. It all reminds me of Valentine's Day or some shit. Or maybe Christmas. The bow is tied perfectly, and the color is definitely something *he'd* pick.

He loves red because it's vibrant and passionate. But he *really* loves it because the color incites fear. He'd told me that the first day I'd met him. We talked for hours about Hindu deities and how the color red was associated with one of the most revered goddesses in Hindu mythology.

It was a sunny day then in Los Angeles. I was a young girl trying to find her way in the world and was a full-time student at USC. So, in between working a part-time gig at McDonald's, I found myself doing other odd jobs to pay the bills. Stuff like cleaning houses, babysitting people's kids and modeling. At that time, I had a sick mother and a younger sister I needed to help take care of who were still back in Mexico City where I'd left them a few years before.

Los Angeles was *the* city to be in then.

I listened to all my girlfriends who'd told me it was the place to be if you were trying to become a superstar. The place was teeming with wannabe actresses, singers and models. The likelihood of actually *making it* was slim but we were young and dumb enough to try. In between working and running to every single audition possible, we partied like rockstars.

The day I'd met him, I was out with a few friends at one of the hottest bars in West Hollywood having a drink. The music was loud, and the hot spot was full of celebrities along with regular people. My girlfriends quickly dispersed to their respective corners of the party striking their practiced poses. The ones they'd spend hours in the mirror doing while they poofed-up their hair and slicked blood red lipstick on their lips. We all had killer bodies then and wore the highest heels the stiletto factory could make.

I'd ordered a martini, then tried my best not to spill it. I took a seat, crossing my legs daintily and made sure my long dark hair fell just over one shoulder correctly. It didn't take long, maybe five minutes to get a few looks.

Rich men. Old men. Broke men. Sleezeballs.

I ignored them all because *one* man had my attention then.

And God was he handsome. But not in the sort of way that would catch a woman's eye immediately. From a distance, he looked like a bit of a nerd, but I knew there was a lot lingering beneath that preppy exterior.

He walked closer, holding a beer in his hand.

When all the men at that fancy, movie-star studded party were sipping cocktails, expensive cognacs and martinis, this man was drinking a beer. Like he was at a backyard barbeque.

I was intrigued he made no attempts to fit in. He held his own. He was confident and quiet. Different. The type of man I knew I wanted to know more about.

He smiled at me as he approached. It was life-altering, earth-shifting. The pull between us nearly caused my stomach to fall out of my ass.

We only talked. Both of us were cautious, as if we were going to detonate at any moment and blow up the heart of the other.

He was six foot five, two hundred and thirty pounds then, mocha skin and thick curly ebony hair—all courtesy of his African-American father and Pakistani mother. He was gorgeous with his devastating pearly white smile and dimples in both of his cheeks.

He's still handsome. Hot. Mouthwatering. Panty-melting.

Think Idris Elba...just a little different.

And the realization of that *right now* makes me feel ill.

But that chance encounter was twelve years ago...

This-is-the-fucking-present.

I focus on the cactus plants which are spread around the front of this gorgeous million-dollar mansion. Everything in this upscale neighborhood looks immaculate. The grass is green and perfectly manicured. And the stone at my feet is so white it could almost blind you. The Grecian-shaped swimming pool glistens a gorgeous blue beneath the sun and a bright orange blowup cheetah floats across the expanse of it.

I twist around and face the three-story white stone mansion with its floor-to-ceiling windows.

All the houses around here look similar. Big. Expensive. Breathtaking.

Glancing to my right, I eye our neighbors Mr. and Mrs. William Penn. An old couple. Super-rich. Super-nosey. Super-annoying. They're maneuvering their golf clubs into the trunk of their red Mercedes Benz. They lift a hand and wave.

I do the same.

My headache subsides. I think about how these pills would go down perfectly with a large glass of Sauvignon blanc rushing down my throat behind them. But I know it isn't possible today since I have endless meetings that'll run until the sun goes down since I'm working on the case of the century. Then it would all be followed by dinner at one of the fancy restaurants on The Strip.

Las Vegas—Spanish for “The Meadows”—Nevada.

The birthplace of people such as tennis champion Andre Agassi, former professional freestyle motocross rider, Carey Hart and *NASCAR* drivers Kyle and Kurt Busch. And permanent residence of people like boxer Floyd Mayweather and *MMA* fighter and actress Gina Carano.

A city that is the home of the first desegregated hotel—the Moulin Rouge Hotel—in the United States of America which opened on May 24, 1955. The Mormons first put down roots here in the 1850s. Then the city was settled in 1905 and officially incorporated a few years later.

Las Vegas is now the most populous city in Nevada. Population—six hundred and thirty thousand people smack dab on a floor in the basin of the Mojave Desert. We're in the southern corner of the state and close to the borders of California and Arizona, where we often escape for weekends away from the craziness of this place.

Las Vegas is the “Entertainment Capital of the World” famous for its casinos, gambling and its twenty-four-hour, never-ending glitzy night life, strippers, endless rows of hotels and constant line-up of Broadway shows.

This is a place where *anything* goes. All you have to do is pick your poison and you'll find it...somewhere.

I came here to Las Vegas first. And when Marcellus finished his degree at UCLA he followed, since he said it had always been his dream to live in a city like this. Wild. Hot mostly. No, actually, *insanely* hot during the summer. And cool in the winter. This place is big and full of endless possibilities.

Marcellus and I became a couple quickly and fell in love just as fast.

It was passionate and raw. Hard emotion. Crazy fights. Rough make-up sex. The fragile stuff young love is made of.

Marcellus had made good on all his promises—the ones he'd made when he first settled here—most of them anyways. He saw this city as the gem it is since it's full of land which could be developed and turned into amazing addresses for both residential and commercial space. In the early years, he'd made millions building up his company no one had believed in except for us.

I'd supported his dreams.

At one particular high point in our lives I swore I would've chased him to the far edges of the earth. I believed in him and in his vision *that* much.

Marcellus Kingsley went from being a broke college kid who slept in his aunt's garage and washed pots in a restaurant kitchen while he finished his degree in architectural design back in LA, to a Las Vegas resident and billionaire in literally a few years.

Exhaling, I watch as the vehicle is finally lowered to the ground. The men scramble around and undo the straps which had secured it in place during transport. Then one rushes around the expensive car and polishes it up speedily. It shines beneath the burning sun and the emblem on the front of the vehicle reminds me it likely did cost around two hundred thousand dollars, maybe more.

One of the workers backs away from the car, gives the vehicle an impressed look then lets out a whistle. "It's beautiful," he says. "It'll go good

with your suit.” He winks.

“Si. Yes.” I nod a few times and eye over the pant suit I’m wearing. It’s my daily uniform. I rarely get to wear anything else seeing that I usually have a six-day work week.

The Penn’s pull out of their driveway and give me another wave. I flick my hand in their direction a few times. They crane their necks as they drive off attempting to see what’s going on.

Nosey bastards.

It’s nothing to see here...move along.

I look at the clipboard in my shaky hands. My knuckles are already turning white as I eye over the words written in the notes section of the official document from the dealership.

The note reads: **Happy Birthday, my darling. I love you more than life.**

More than whose life? Mine? His? Ours?

Life.

I think about what that means in terms of a *sentencing* and laugh.

The constant beeping of the tractor trailer as it reverses fills my head.

I’m parched and in desperate need of a good dousing with holy water. I spin away from the workmen, so they can’t see the tears welling in my eyes. The man in charge shouts directions to the other men in Spanish. I crane my neck above to the clear blue sky. A few sparrows flutter by and the sun blazes so hot I swear it could burn everything beneath it to ash...the same way I’m considering torching this beautiful house behind me.

“Ma’am! Ma’am,” a voice calls.

I spin around to face the sound, putting on my best “I’m good. I’m not considering the consequences of capital murder,” face on.

He smiles sweetly and for a second it all reminds me there is good still left in the world, so my mood softens a little. He rushes toward me and

wipes the sweat from his face with a towel. The silver tag on his uniform tells me his name is “Julio.”

“This is a *fabulous* car,” Julio gushes.

“Yes, it is.”

Julio smiles but it cracks after a few seconds when he senses I’m not happy. “I hope you’re happy with it. If there are any problems, please call us and we’ll have whatever it is fixed right away.”

I nod. “Yes, will do.”

He drops the keys in my hand, then peers at the page attached to the clipboard that still isn’t signed. His eyes narrow as he leans in. His smile is stiff and confused. He points to the page. “Please sign right there and, uh, we’ll be on our way.”

I’m stunned, unable to speak.

He inches near to me and taps on the signature block. “Please sign right there.” He leans in closer. “Please sign your name right there, Miss, uh, Miss Casen.”

Smiling, I do just as Julio says, scribbling the name down so hard I almost snap the goddamn pen. I shove everything back toward him. “Thank you.”

“Yes, thank you, Miss Casen. Enjoy your gift. You have a good day.”

“Yes, you too,” I say sweetly.

Except that my name isn’t Miss *Casen*...

For the last ten years, it’s been *Mrs.* Luciana fucking Kingsley.

Neve

SLIPPING OUT FROM BENEATH the sheets, I pad across the room, feeling the plush carpet between my toes. I press my hand to the glass of the floor-to-ceiling window in front of me and exhale long and deep.

M83's *Midnight City* sounds from the iPod dock on the nightstand.

I have the day off today, and I plan to enjoy it.

The sky is bright and the sun blazes down on The Strip that's full of people below. I spend a lot of time, especially at night, watching the city through this large window. I'd gone from the girl who used to stumble The Strip drunk and tired with her friends whenever I did come here, to a woman who now resides in a three-bedroom penthouse apartment which sits high above it in the CityCenter—a magnificent building which is a sixteen-point-seven million square foot space.

It's incredible what can happen in one night...

I'd gone to college. I'd gotten my degree only because my mom said I had to, but it wasn't really what I wanted. She wanted me to become an accountant. I barely know how to multiply. Numbers just aren't my thing, but words are.

Picking up the tiny notepad I'd scribbled on an hour ago, I look at the words.

Soft curves

Like peaches

Smooth skin

Pink lips

Sin?

I press it to my chest, exhale and place the notepad down on the small table next to me.

After finishing college and taking a year off, I'd gone into marketing

and landed a job for a top public relations firm as a publicist. They sent me here to do a proposal pitch for a consulting role within KI, since the firm I worked for was vying to handle KI's marketing for select projects. And during that hour, I was introduced to a man who told me that one day I'd regret him—a man who would change my life. I'm not exactly sure if he'd done that in a good way or in a bad one, since as of lately, I'm tangled up in so many knots when it comes to him, half the time I can't even walk straight...*literally*.

Smiling, I snatch up one of his shirts. I wrap it around myself and inhale the subtle scent which clings to the expensive white fabric. A mixture of his masculine scent and high-priced cologne—something *Gucci* with a lingering aroma of expensive cigars. It's uniquely *him*.

The clock on the wall tells me it's just after lunch time. It'll be a few more hours before I see him again. And he promised me that even with everything he had to do today with work, he'd make time to see me since it's my special day.

It's one of the milestone birthdays, deserving of a special gift. Maybe jewelry or perfume and dinner at a fancy restaurant. I have it in my head he might disappoint me. The way he had last year on my birthday when he told me he couldn't make it at the last minute. It wasn't his fault. But it was all unfortunately because his youngest son had the flu and his wife was travelling.

Yeah, he has a wife.

I was getting to that part.

But, *waitttt*, don't judge...not yet. Wait a few more chapters.

I'm not a whore. Or a homewrecker. At least I like to think I'm not.

I'm just a girl who fell in love with a man who took my breath away the very first time I saw him a year ago. He introduced himself as Marcellus Kingsley, billionaire real estate developer—who had once even graced the cover of *GQ* magazine—and CEO of Kingsley Industries.

Kingsley Industries which is often referred to as "KI" is a private company which employs more than five thousand people here in Nevada,

California and also in Oregon.

Before that meeting had begun, when I first had the pleasure of gracing his breathing space, I almost tripped in my high heels when he leaned in to take my hand with his big, warm one and shook it. He was young for what he had accomplished—only thirty-four years old then. And he was handsome with his heartbreaker’s smile and his dark skin and thick hair cut close to his scalp. His features were exotic-looking. I’d never quite seen a man who looked like him before. I was intrigued. And the way his chocolate eyes swept over me made me feel special.

Plus, he wasn’t a creep. He didn’t spend his time at that meeting flirting and shooting me devilish glances. When I put my breasts in his face, dangling the bait, he even turned his face away...ignoring me. He was a beautiful man who had the control to resist beautiful women.

Marcellus Kingsley was *all* business. He wanted to know the facts. He wanted objectives and deadlines. He’d come to that meeting with a plan. And eventually hired me to execute it. It wasn’t what was supposed to happen. Not exactly anyways. Marcellus was supposed to agree to have the public relations firm I worked for handle the marketing for two of KI’s projects. Instead, he offered me the job and lured me away from said company, offering me a two-year contract and a six-figure salary.

After the rejection I’d endured in that first meeting with him, I kept my head low and scribbled notes down as he spoke to me in his smooth, deep baritone that had my panties soaking wet before the meeting was over. And then when he left, it was like an Arctic breeze swept into that room, cooling me the fuck off since I was close to suffering from heatstroke while I’d been in his vicinity.

Craning my neck to the vaulted ceiling above me, I laugh a little.

I think about his pensive eyes. Dark. Kind. *Veiled*.

You can never tell what’s *really* behind them. I spot humility some days. Other days, I get a glimpse of the pride and arrogance which lurks beneath his skin. And *every day*, I see ambition in his browns that are encircled by lashes too long and dark to belong to that of a man. He has boyish eyes, innocent.

And the way they'd looked at me just this morning before he rolled out of the bed that's a few feet away from me...

Often, I wonder if he looks at his wife that way.

I don't have the guts to ask the question. I don't even have the ladyballs to find out who she is, *exactly*. My eyes zero in on my laptop on the opposite side of the room that's open. I pad across the large space to stand in front of it and run my fingers over the keyboard.

I know her government name.

I even know where she lives.

I'd even heard fabulous/scary things about her. She's the same age as Marcellus—thirty-five years old now. She's a criminal defense attorney and is partner at the law firm she works at along with two other menacing attorneys who are men. She'd even taken on a few high-profile cases pro bono which she's won. The word around town is that she's a tough cookie, a Mexicana through and through, a real super *bitch*, capable of defending a fucking pencil if it was up for murder.

Marcellus doesn't talk about her at all and that never bothered me but nowadays it does.

I never imagined myself in a relationship with a man who has a wife or even a man who's ten years my senior but here I am—sick and in love.

I squeeze my eyes shut and think of the way his lips felt against my ear this morning when he'd told me he loved me. Instantly, I become hot everywhere imagining the way his hands felt all over my skin. The way my body always responds to his touch like he owns my fucking brain along with my bleeding heart now is apparent.

I run my hand over his jacket that's slung over the back of the desk chair I stand behind. The tag on the inside of it is monogrammed with his initials—M.L.K.

Marcellus Lincoln Kingsley.

Husband of Luciana Valentina Kingsley. Father of three. Billionaire. Freak in bed. Kind as fuck. Owner of a *huge* cock. Panty-melting smile.

I tap on the folder next to my laptop and flick it open to find the architectural plans for the layout of Scarlett Hill in Centennial Hills—the multi-million-dollar master development Marcellus is currently in the process of getting off the ground. The location is in Summerlin, which is twenty minutes outside of the city. It will be a gated community, complete with tennis courts, swimming pools and twenty-four hour security.

“It will be a place like no other,” he’d said, lifting his arms up high when he’d last talked about it with me.

I admire the man’s visions. He could turn *nothingness* into something great like a sculptor hovering over a colorless lump of clay. Marcellus had been hailed as being a visionary. For taking empty space and constructing amazing homes and commercial buildings on it. For beautifying some of the neighborhoods around here. And the charity work his company does is endless. It ranges from pouring millions back into the community with programs for the unemployed and recent college graduates, mentoring the city’s youth and overseeing repair work on the community centers in the city.

I smile and run my finger over a picture of him in the pile.

Then I flip the pages over to land on a colorful photograph of the large plot of dusty land in Paradise, which is adjacent to The Strip, that continues to sit vacant. It’s where Marcellus plans to construct a billion-dollar hotel—a gambling and entertainment mecca called The Red when he gets the approval he’s been waiting forever for.

As the publicist for Kingsley Enterprises’ new projects, I have more than enough work on my hands to last me another year, but work is the last thing on my mind.

As of lately, all I’ve been dreaming about is having this man’s children.

He already has them.

Becoming his wife.

He already has one.

Asking him to move into this penthouse apartment and make it a

home.

He already has one of those too.

“I’m going to leave her, Neve, at the right time. Then it’ll be you and me,” he’d crooned in my ear just last night when we were fucking.

It’s the oldest horseshit line in the book, isn’t it?

The man who cheats on his wife with a cute young thing... He constantly gives her gifts. He strings her along for *years*, whispering total kaka to her, planting thoughts in her head about the two of them living a happy shiny life together when the only thing that *really* lies ahead for her is heartbreak and possibly suicide.

I wouldn’t be that girl.

I can’t be that girl.

But, I love him so, so much.

Another loud breath leaves me when my cellphone buzzes. I rummage through my purse and find it at the bottom, lit up with a million messages. I tap on the last one.

Marcellus: Happy Birthday.

Me: Thanks.

Marcellus: I love you.

A girly smile stretches across my face.

Me: I love you more.

Marcellus: I can’t wait to see you later. I have something very special planned.

Me: I can’t wait.

Marcellus: I want you to enjoy your day. You only get to turn twenty-five years old once.

Me: That is true.

I bite my bottom lip when I debate asking him if he'll stay the weekend which he usually doesn't.

I find myself always desperate for the mornings when I wake up and find him sitting in front of his laptop, wearing nothing but a pair of lounge pants and his thick-framed glasses as he taps away at it. Usually then, he has a cup of coffee in a hand and he's watching endless CNBC, staring at tickers and tracking stock prices. I think a bit then decide I'll ask him another time, maybe when he's full of wine and naked.

A few more messages come in.

Marcellus: How do you like the gift?

My brows press together, confused, I look around the apartment.

No flowers. No card. No pretty wrapped box.

Me: What gift?

Marcellus

ALL THE MUSCLES IN my face die so fast I swear I'm having a stroke!

I gaze at the reply on my cellphone, resisting the urge to crush it.

"Simeyon!" I yell, swiveling my chair away from the Las Vegas skyline.

"Yes," he says in his feminine as fuck voice, as he bounces inside my office and lingers at the door. He runs his hands through his blond mop. My eyes rake over the dress shirt he's wearing that has more colors in it than the rainbow. And don't get me started on the pants which lead right down to his white patent-leather *Fendi* loafers.

"Da. Yes, Mr. Kingsley." He smiles.

Simeyon Grigoriy, my personal assistant who undergoes a huge identity crisis at least twice a week because he also thinks somewhere deep down he's a Russian ballerina. Simeyon is good at his job but he spends more time applying his lip gloss than he does listening to my fucking instructions. He messes things up. Usually small things. Not all the time, just sometimes. But still, I love him to death. And I'd told Simeyon, a few days ago, in plain English that this...*this*...he-could-not-fuck-up.

This was a simple transaction. Buy a car. Send it to Neve with a birthday note.

Please, for the love of Christ Almighty, tell me he got this right!

Easing up from my chair, I exhale before I ask the question that's about to turn my heartbeat all sorts of crazy.

Simeyon's pale blue eyes widen even more. He waits patiently for me to speak. But, I can't speak. My throat has suddenly gone dry and my vision is blurry. I wipe the sweat that's beaded along my forehead.

"Whattt isssttt?" he asks, drawling out all the words.

"Where did you send the Bentley?"

He pouts. “Where you told me to?”

I loosen the necktie around my neck that’s strangling me. “Neve doesn’t appear to have received my gift yet.”

Simeyon pushes up his shirt sleeve and checks his watch. “No, that isn’t *possible*. I had confirmation two hours ago that the Bentley was *delivered*.” He points his index finger up toward the sky. “One second.” He disappears and returns with his cellphone, scrolling through all the messages. “I have a copy of the delivery confirmation right here, Mr. Kingsley.” He dabs at the gloss on his lips. “It says the delivery confirmation was signed by Miss Neve “fuck you” Casen.” He bats his eyelashes.

My face scrunches in confusion. “What?”

Simeyon stares at his cellphone. “Miss Neve “fuck you” Casen.” He says it over and over trying to make sense of the signature.

Frustration flares up the back of my neck like hellfire. “The address!” I shout.

Simeyon jumps. He scrolls through his cellphone faster, working his two thumbs quick like a text addict.

Leaning forward, I place my hands on my desk, waiting for him to respond.

He stills and mutters something to himself in Russian. His big eyes which are filled with unmistakable horror lift to meet mine.

“The address,” I repeat.

He visibly swallows. “The Bentley was delivered to 1 Sandy Desert Road.”

My home...

Shit. Shit. Shit.

I lower my head and clench my fists. “Neve “fuck you” Casen.” Standing straight, I cover my face with my hands.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Kingsley. I’ll fix this.”

I laugh a little.

“I’m going to go right now. I’m going to drive to your house.” He marches forward to my desk and snatches up my car keys. “I’m going to buy Luciana some flowers along the way...”

“Luciana hates flowers,” I deadpan.

He searches his brain. “Chocolate then?”

I slant my head to the side in one irritated move. “Fine. And then you’re going to do what?”

“I-I-I’m going to go and get the car and take it to where it belongs.” He wrinkles his nose. “I’ll t-t-talk to Luciana.”

A laugh rips from me.

There’s no talking to Luciana!

“I-I-I’ll talk to her. I’ll explain to her that the car was for a client and that it went to the wrong address.”

“You’re going to *lie* to a criminal *attorney*?”

I have absolutely no confidence in Simeyon to do what I’ve been doing every day for the last year.

He shakes his head rapidly. “No, no. I’m going to bend the truth just a little bit. I’ll make up something,” he whisper-yells as he rushes out of my office.

“Fuck,” I growl to myself. “And don’t get in a wreck with my car!”

He waves as he heads out.

I plop back down in my chair and snatch up my cellphone. It vibrates incessantly with more messages. I scroll through them and find they’re all from Neve. Not one of them are from Luciana.

I don’t know if that makes me feel relaxed or more nervous.

Fuck.

“Mr. Kingsley,” my secretary, Kelly, says leaning into my door.

“Yes.” My response is an exhausted breath along with the word.

“Your next meeting is in a half an hour.”

I only nod, realizing I don't have time to respond to every single one of Neve's messages. I spin around in my chair and gaze out the window at the mountains which surround this city. I spot the open plot of land where I envision building The Red if I can get these assholes on the City Council to agree to my plans and approve the relevant construction permits. It's been two years so far, creeping into three to get this venture off the ground. The realization sends *rage* into my bones making them ache.

I run my fingers through my hair, feeling inclined to rip it from my scalp.

Rubbing my jaw, I think back to the days when I used to wash pots. The memory bleeds into the realization I grew up eating rice much of the time. Nothing but *rice*. Monday to Sunday we-ate-rice. And I never complained.

I also make certain I never forget that fact. After all, it made me who I am today.

I was born on a rainy July morning at UCLA Medical Center in Los Angeles.

I-am-American.

My father is African-American, and I say that not just meaning he's a black man but in the very literal sense that he is *African*—from what is now called Zimbabwe and what was then called Rhodesia when he was born. He was given United States citizenship shortly after he came here. He met my mother a year after his arrival one day in a convenience store on Ocean Boulevard back in California which he frequented. She worked there as a clerk in between the two other jobs she had.

My mother was born to a poor family during the First Indo-Pakistani War and immigrated to the United States in the seventies. My father had always told me the story, saying my mother was “the most beautiful woman

on the west coast” he’d ever seen. It didn’t take him long to propose to her. And they’ve been together ever since.

My parents were hardworking people. And after my mother suffered an injury when she’d taken a bad fall at work, it was only my father whose job brought money into the home. We lived in a small one-bedroom apartment in Echo Park back in California. My parents had the tiny bedroom while I slept on the very uncomfortable and itchy couch.

We lived like that for a long time until I moved in with my aunt.

My father *struggled* to put me through college. He’d saved for *years* hoping to see me become more educated than both he and my mother were. And I had every intention of not letting them down. My father was proud and so was my mother that he was able to educate me on a janitor’s wage, when he often worked more than a hundred hours a week.

I’m an only child. So, I was *everything* to my parents growing up. I’m their pride and joy and “the beat of my mother’s heart,” as she would say.

Now, my parents live in a sprawling four-bedroom mansion in Laurel Canyon...

Coming from *nothing* can be a great inspiration to want to become *something*...

I’ve spent the last nine years building this company up to what it is now. And I’ll be damned if I’ll let a few jackasses stop my plan of building a hotel and casino that will rival some of the largest ones here.

Mobsters like Benjamin “Bugsy” Seigel and Meyer Lansky were on to something when they’d built The Flamingo in 1946, even though they’d financed the construction of it by running their criminal dollars through Mormon-owned banks back then.

Still, they were visionaries.

Men who could see the green dollar bills floating in the future from the legacy they were building. At that time, Las Vegas was nothing but barren desert, but they knew that one day, it would be much, much bigger.

Tourism is everything to this city. It’s a sixty billion dollar a year

industry which employs approximately thirty percent of the residents here, and resident count is increasing with more people deciding to settle in Las Vegas.

We host around forty million visitors a year during some of the biggest sports and entertainment events. One hundred and thirteen hotels with a collective one hundred thousand rooms support the influx of people who arrive here yearly. And the number of visitors each year is only increasing and that feeds the need to *build*.

More hotels and casinos. More single-family homes and gated communities.

Just more.

If you look around this magnificent landscape, there's nothing but space.

Dry, arid, desert land.

And it's all up for the taking.

While building this billion-dollar, multi-national company, I'd made friends along the way, but I'd also made a lot of enemies.

Small-time crack dealers for taking their territory away from them for a little while when KI turned their neighborhoods into nicer places by planting trees and flowers there. Shit like that. Spurned women because they always wanted more than I could give. They always thought I'd leave Luciana, but I'd *never* leave a woman like my wife.

And the politicians...

Those are the men who'd *especially* like to see me fall.

But I won't give them the satisfaction.

They hate me because of my vision. They despise me because I see a new direction for Las Vegas as we move further into the 21st century.

I pay my taxes. I donate a fuck-ton of money to charity each year. Hell, I might even run for mayor one day...It's just a thought.

The men who run this city will *never* welcome a man like me with open arms. I won't explore what the color of my skin possibly has to do with that...

I can afford those types of enemies since I rarely see those men. What I *can't* afford is to make an enemy out of the woman I sleep next to almost every night.

Taking a breath so big that my chest expands with the action, I snatch up my cellphone and tap out a text message to Neve, then one to Luciana.

Neve replies.

Luciana does not.

Fuck.

The party has just begun.

If you liked Luciana, Neve and Marcellus and want to read more of their story, click on the link below!

[His Mistress; Her Lover: A LGBTQ Romance Novel - Savannah Blue](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

My name is Savannah Blue.

I am the alter ego of contemporary romance author Daya Daniels.

I love words. I love books. And I love the folks who read them.

I plan to write more transgender stories in the future, so stay tuned.

In the meantime, check out my playlist!

If you have questions or comments email me @ blue_savannah@yahoo.com.

Table of Contents

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