

INEXHALE

Season Two

Chie Alemán



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In/Exhale: Season Two

by: Chie Alemán

“With every breath, the old moment is lost; a new moment arrives. We exhale and we let go of the old moment. It is lost to us. In doing so, we let go of the person we used to be. We inhale and breathe in the moment that is becoming. In doing so, we welcome the person we are becoming. We repeat the process. This is meditation. This is renewal. This is life.”

– Lama Surya Das , [Letting Go Of The Person You Used To Be](#)

Author's Note

Those of you who read my author's note for Season One of *In/Exhale* know that it isn't just a story, but very much part of me. Season Two—especially the second half—was a really rough time for both Kai and me, and I know it can be difficult to read at certain points. It was extremely difficult to write.

I'm a firm believer that I'm not a creator, but more of an interpreter—these emotions and characters already exist, and my role is to bring them to life for you so that you can experience them, too. It's one reason I've never done well with a rigid writing style that involves a lot of careful planning, because even if I come up with a dozen possible ways something could turn out, my characters always take me somewhere else—and the story is inevitably better when I follow them instead of trying to too harshly take the lead.

That was so true with this season. I struggled for a long, long time with the direction it wanted to go, knowing how hard it would be for me, for Kai, and for my readers. But no matter how much both Kai and I struggled against it, I finally realized that I wasn't being true to myself, to Kai, to the story, or to any of you by trying to hold it back.

And so I went there. I went to the dark places, to the scary places, to the places that Kai had been avoiding just as much as I had. And, as I look back, having spent a lot of time on Season Three, I know it was the right decision. It's impossible to grow, to heal, without confronting old wounds, and though I wish things could have been easier, I know now it was the only way.

What really gives me courage to keep writing this story, to keep *sharing* this story, is the great feedback I've gotten from some of you who have your own demons to deal with, and who, through reading this last season, have able to confront them yourselves and start moving toward healing.

As the old cliché says, "It's always darkest before the dawn," right?

This past year has been a hard one, a dark one, but I'm hopeful there's much more light in the future, for me, for Kai, and for all of you. Thanks for reading.

You can interact with me on Twitter [@ChieAleman](https://twitter.com/ChieAleman) or visit my website, <http://chiealeman.com> for more disability-related fiction and musings, including information on *UnConventional*, my first professionally published novel, available now from all major ebook retailers.

Enjoy, and I'll see you in Season Three.

-Chie Alemán

Note: This season's ebook includes all the original appendices (so you can refresh on MLS and FS, for example), along with two new ones. The first new appendix offers a bit of an explanation of the US foster system (inspired by some of your questions about it) and the second gives you a floor plan of JMH, in case you're spatially curious as to which

departments and sections occupy which floors of the hospital.

October 28, 2000

“The coffee ready yet?” Art called, coming in from the back room.

“Almost,” Renee said, standing on a step ladder, pouring the water into the machine.

“Good. The ASL story hour is at ten, and a lot of people from the Deaf Community come out of the woodwork. I want to make sure everyone has coffee if they want it.”

Renee finished and started climbing down, glancing over at Art, who was pushing a little rolling cart stacked with folding chairs. “Is this something you do often?”

Art sighed. “I used to do it monthly, but the volunteer had her own baby and had to stop. This is the first month in a long time that I was able to find someone else to fill in.”

“I’ll get this started and meet you in the children’s section to get those set up?”

“Sounds good,” Art said, calling over his shoulder. “Make sure there are plenty of cups and sugar and all of that before you do.”

“Of course, si—Art,” Renee said. Even after a couple months, she still sometimes slipped into “sir” instead of the requested first name; her grandparents manners were drilled into her brain.

A few minutes later, Renee was just finishing setting up the chairs for the parents when she heard the chime of the front door, indicating someone was here. It wasn’t quite nine yet, when they officially opened, so she jogged out to the main area of the store to investigate. Her heart did a delightful skip when she saw a familiar blond figure in a wheelchair roll in.

He didn’t notice her immediately, but when he did, his face lit up, and he pushed closer, gliding to a stop just a foot away. “Morning,” he said.

“Morning,” she echoed, her chest suddenly tight and her cheeks flushed. “We don’t open for another ten minutes, but I suppose I can help you if you need anything?”

Kai smiled, shook his head. “I know I’m early, but I figured that gives me time to pick out the books.”

Renee’s eyebrows crawled together in confusion. “Books?”

Before Kai could respond, Art appeared, rushing up to Kai and patting him enthusiastically on the back. “So glad you could make it. The kids have really missed out the past few months.”

Kai and Art shook heartily, but Kai laughed at the bewilderment that was evident on Renee’s face. “I’m guessing he didn’t tell you I’m the replacement.”

Art shrugged. “I try not to get involved,” he said, but he flashed a crafty smile as he muttered something about double-checking the register and disappeared, leaving them alone.

“So . . . when did Art ask you about doing this?”

Kai pushed toward the children’s section. “Last week.”

“And you said yes? I thought you were avoiding here because of me.”

“I was. I didn’t tell him yes until yesterday.” Kai disappeared into the shelves, his back to her, so she couldn’t read his expression. Although, with Kai, even seeing his face may not have clued her in. But surely it meant something if he had only agreed to

do this after reconnecting with her, right? And as good an actor as Kai may be, he couldn't possibly have faked the look on his face when he first saw her. It made Renee smile.

The space between the children's' bookshelves was a little tighter than elsewhere in the store, and Kai pulled himself along slowly by gripping the shelves on each side as he scanned the titles.

"What are you looking for?"

He paused, dipped his head back to look up at her. "Something to read to the kids?"

She stuck her tongue out. "What about Dr. Seuss? All kids love him."

"Yeah, most deaf people can't appreciate rhyme in the same way that hearing can," Kai explained, pulling out a book and flipping through it. "I can interpret, of course, but I'd rather do something else that translates better. Preferably something that will help reinforce signs they already know and maybe teach them some new ones."

"What about Amelia Bedlia? I used to love those when I was a kid."

Kai replaced the book he'd been skimming and pulled himself farther down the row. "I don't know those. Jon read to me before our parents died, but after that, my access to books was more limited." Kai shrugged.

"Oh, it's about this maid who takes everything literally, so like, she's told to draw the drapes, so she takes a sketch pad and draws them. Or she's told to dress the chicken for dinner, so she puts clothes on it."

Kai reached the edge of the row, so he was able to turn around. She couldn't read his expression, but his head was tilted to the side slightly. "*Draw the drapes*," Kai said as he signed, making an outline of curtains in the air with his spread fingers, bringing them out, then down. Next, he held his hands up, flat, palms out, bringing them together so his thumbs touched. "**Draw** the drapes," he repeated in English, this time holding his left hand out and guiding his pinky along his palm, as if he were scribbling on it. "Wordplay like that rarely translates from English to ASL."

"I'm sorry," Renee said, staring at her foot as she toed the floor, embarrassed.

"Hey," he said, reaching out for her, his fingertips just touching her; it was enough to send that wonderful tingle coursing through her, taking away some of her embarrassment. "You're used to thinking in English. It's OK. Just . . . imagine you were going to read one of these books, but in French instead of the way it's written, in English. Think visually. Books where there's a lot of visual storytelling. Or books that teach colors and numbers and things like that."

"You act like you've done this before."

Kai shrugged. "Something like that."

Renee held in a sigh at Kai's usual noncommittal response, but she let it be. With Kai, it seemed she'd have to choose her battles, and this wasn't one worth pursuing, at least not right now. Renee followed Kai to an endcap, where a few new releases were displayed alongside some classics.

"Oh, I was obsessed with this book," Kai said, plucking a copy of the *Velveteen Rabbit* and flipping through it. "Jon read it to me." Kai turned a few pages, scanning the text. "I used to wonder if I wasn't 'Real,' and if that's why I was so broken," Kai said in a whisper. "I thought, maybe if the rabbit could become Real, I could, too." He sighed, set the book in his lap. "Real isn't how you are made," Kai said, as if quoting, his fingertip tracing the outline of the rabbit on the cover, "but something that happens to you when you're loved. When you're Real, you don't mind being hurt. Once you are Real, you can't

be ugly.”

Renee laid a hand on his shoulder, relieved when he accepted her touch by reaching up and resting his hand on top of hers, only for a moment before looking up at her. His eyes were filled with a depth of emotion she couldn't quite extract, like staring at the back of a weaving and trying to interpret the picture on the other side.

She squeezed around him, jogging down the shelves till she found what she was looking for, pulling it out and returning to show him. “What about this one?”

Kai blinked, shook his head, as if he'd been lost in thought before finally reaching out and accepting the book. He flipped through it. “*The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. Oh, this is perfect, Re.”

She loved hearing her name abbreviated like that, since he was the only one who ever did, and it rolled off his tongue, deep and open and bright. “It's beautiful to look at, and it's got a lot of learning stuff in it. Fruits and colors and numbers and things like that.”

He smiled at her, tucked the books between his legs to make sure they wouldn't fall, and wheeled toward the reading area, laying them out on the folding chair Renee had assumed the reader was going to sit in.

“What are you doing?”

“I'm going to read these, so I can start thinking of how I'll interpret them. Especially the *Velveteen Rabbit*. It's been a long time and that one's a bit more complex.”

“Oh. OK. Well, uh, I'll be in the front if you need me.”

Kai smiled. “You should watch, if you can. You know, later.” He blushed slightly.

Renee nodded, then, at the last minute, rushed up and stole a quick kiss. She wanted to tell him something cheesy, like he felt Real to her, but flushed deep red instead at the mere thought, so held her tongue. “Uh, good luck with the kids. I'll talk to you after?”

He nodded. “Maybe I'll even convince Art to let me steal you away for lunch.”

Art hadn't been joking about how the place would fill up for the story hour. Though the store was packed with parents and children, instead of the din of multiple conversations, she merely heard the slap of skin against skin and the occasional inarticulate sound as parents gossiped eagerly with each other, catching up, and the thunderous footsteps and cackles of children playing and chasing one another. Renee found herself entranced by the conversations, how animated they were, involving much more than just hands.

After a few moments, one of the mothers helped settle all the children, and Kai rolled in, taking his place at the front. Some of the mothers took the chairs Art and Renee had laid out earlier, but there were more adults than chairs, so many simply stood toward the back, waiting. Renee had never been around deaf people before, let alone so many, and she felt a bit awkward, not knowing what to say or do, so she found a spot in the back, where she could still see, and decided to take up Kai's invitation to watch.

Kai began to sign, his hands moving, his face shifting, that expressiveness put to beautiful use.

“Are you Renee?” one of the moms whispered, leaning in. “Art told me he had hired someone new.”

“You speak English,” Renee said, half surprised and half relieved.

The woman laughed. “Pam. My husband's deaf, and so are our children. They

were so excited when I told them ASL story hour was back.”

Renee nodded. “What’s he saying?”

“He’s introducing himself, inviting them to ask questions. They’re asking about his wheelchair.”

Renee mimicked the sign she’d seen Kai make, his hands on each side, as if he were pushing his wheels. “This means *wheelchair*?” Renee asked.

Pam nodded. “He’s explaining that walking is difficult for him, so his wheelchair helps. Oh, now he’s asking the kids what color it is.”

Renee watched as the kids raised their hands, palms flat, thumbs folded, waving them in the air. Kai smiled and nodded his fist, repeated the sign. “*Blue*?” Renee asked, also imitating this sign.

Pam nodded, grinning. “Now he’s asking them what their favorite colors are. And pointing out some examples of each. That’s wonderful; he’s really reinforcing what they know, engaging them. The other reader wasn’t like that at all.”

Renee couldn’t help smiling.

“Now he’s explaining he’s going to read them two stories, one short one and one longer one.”

Renee watched Kai show off the book, holding it up with one hand and signing with the other, his hand in a kind of claw shape, drawing it down sternly over his torso, then folding his left arm and inching a finger along it, his mouth moving a little, but no sound coming out, his eyebrows arching slightly when he did what had to be the sign for “caterpillar.” He looked at the children, his eyebrows scrunching together, leaning forward, his right hand splayed on his side, palm up, fingers slightly curled, as if to say, “huh?” He pointed to the picture of the caterpillar on the cover, then repeated the sign, then held up his fist and moved through several motions involving his fingers, then pointed to the printed word.

“He’s teaching them the sign for caterpillar, and spelling it out for them, too, so they can start to associate the English word with the ASL sign. Wonderful.”

Kai opened the book, making sure everyone got a chance to see the first illustration, then he laid it face down in his lap and began telling the story. Renee found him a delight to watch; he was so expressive, his signing such that she could almost understand him (knowing the story helped, too). Occasionally, he’d pause to show them the picture, explaining a sign and/or spelling it out, as he had with “caterpillar.” Apple, strawberries, oranges, etc. Kai used his entire upper body, hands, arms, and face to tell the story. Even though Renee couldn’t completely follow everything, it was wonderful to watch. He was having fun, and the kids were, too, and they were learning in the process.

Renee found the part where the caterpillar eats all kinds of strange things particularly entertaining, as Kai went through the different foods, excited and eagerly “devouring” the cake, frowning at the pickle, making little asides to point out what she assumed meant he “loved” or “hated” a particular food, then apparently asking the kids for their favorites, seeing a chorus of signs she couldn’t identify, but she could see the other moms looking on approvingly.

She had to cup her hand over her mouth when she began to laugh as he signed out the stomachache the caterpillar got from eating all of that, hands on his stomach, an exaggerated frown on his face. She noticed Kai raised a single brow and met her eyes for a microscopic instant, but otherwise continued with the story. She had to bite her lip again when he showed how the caterpillar wasn’t little anymore, it was big and fat, gesturing and puffing out his cheeks, even changing the sign for “caterpillar” to indicate

it, spreading out his pinkie and thumb as he inched his index finger up along his arm. Pam laughed, too, when she saw how Kai explained what a cocoon was, illustrating the caterpillar wrapping himself up, then pointing to the picture in the book, then spelling out the word.

Finally, he ended with the beautiful butterfly flying away. Renee observed how the children and the parents all raised their hands and shook them. “It’s what we do instead of clapping,” Pam told her. “He’s amazing. I hope Art can convince him to do this again.”

Renee smiled, caught Kai’s eyes. He winked at her before looking back at the kids, asking them something, perhaps about the book, that Renee couldn’t quite make out. But she wanted to. She’d probably never learn to sign as naturally as he did, but she wanted to at least learn some of the basics.

Deafies were notorious for protracted goodbyes—with a visual language like ASL, and a small community, Deaf people didn’t like to turn down the chance to talk to each other face to face. Nevertheless, Kai was surprised, when he reentered the bookstore, to find some of the families from the reading earlier that day still bustling around, and his heart beat a little faster although everything had gone well so far. He’d worried, initially, how the Deafies would receive him, and it was the primary reason he’d avoided the Community the past few years. He had been anxious about the inevitable questions—ones that sometimes came even before introductions were made—about where he learned to sign or where he went to school. Or if he was deaf or hearing. They were questions every Deafie asked someone they met for the first time, but for Kai, they weren’t easy, simple answers. He’d worried about alienating himself again if he answered truthfully, but he didn’t want to get caught in a lie, either. Yes, he’d stayed away from the Community for years, and he’d changed a lot in that time, but Jonesville was a small town, and the Deaf Community, even smaller. His lies would catch up with him and perhaps be worse than the truth.

Fortunately, most of the moms had been too busy collecting children to do more than sign a quick, single-handed “*AMAZING*” or “*THANK-YOU*” as they yanked their kid toward the exits. The few who had lingered had accepted the truth: that he went to school at JSD until eighth grade, at which point, because he was an orphan, the state forced him to go to the hearing high school. Instead of more questions, that merely elicited a chorus of sympathy: *That must have been awful. How could they do that? They forced you into speech therapy?* etc., etc. And it was that simple. Maybe he’d impressed them with his signing enough they assumed he had to be deaf? And why would a hearie go to a deaf school? Still, it was surprisingly relieving to have passed that barrier.

Renee was at the register, smiling and a little harried, ringing up a woman up whose children were racing around one of the display tables, playing tag.

A few other women were in line, and when they saw him, they smiled and waved and thanked him again, in sign, for the wonderful reading, telling him how much their children enjoyed it and how they hoped to see him next month. Another one, Pam, reminded him about the Halloween party at the school for the deaf Tuesday, saying she hoped he’d go. Kai forced a smile that didn’t look fake and signed it depended on whether his *Tales from the Crip* costume came in or not, overacting the part of a corpse, eyes rolled back, tongue hanging out. He knew she was hearing and would appreciate the pun, though gimp jokes often made people uncomfortable. She froze for a moment,

fingerspelled “*C-R-I-P*” back to him, double-checking she’d understood him.

“*JOKE,*” Kai signed. “*I’ll think about it.*”

Kai didn’t see Pam’s response, because he caught a blur of movement out of the corner of his eye, reaching out reflexively before he could truly process what happened. One of the kids had nearly run into Kai’s chair, stopped only by Kai’s firm grip.

“*Be careful,*” Kai signed with one hand, before letting the kid go.

The boy stood there for a moment, gaping. “*You’re the story man.*”

Kai chuckled. “*Yes.*”

“*Are your legs really broken?*”

The other kids had realized the game had stopped and had wandered over, standing around so they could see the conversation.

“*They don’t work right. But I get to use this cool wheelchair.*”

There was a flutter of hands, all wanting to touch it. Kai laughed and nodded, though he gripped his pushrims, keeping his wheels immobile to try to minimize the chance of small fingers accidentally getting pinched.

“*When will you be fixed?*” the first boy signed.

“*I don’t know. Maybe someday,*” Kai said.

By now, Pam, apparently the mother of a few of the kids, wandered over and apologized, still a little flustered by Kai’s earlier joke, but Kai waved her off.

“*TUESDAY, MAYBE,*” Kai signed. “*If not, next month,*” he said, as a form of goodbye, adding a wave to the children as they were herded away. The young question-asker kept glancing back, finally smiling when Kai waved to him specifically.

A few moments later, and the store was empty. Renee wandered over to him, looking tired. She spotted the bag in his lap. “Is that lunch? I’m starving.”

It felt a little jarring to hear English after his signed conversations, and he had to remember to respond verbally. “Yes. Nancy’s chicken salad?”

Renee practically leapt on him, wrapping her arms around his neck and squeezing. “I could marry you right now.” She pulled back, seemingly not even realizing what she’d said, and added, “Let me just double-check with Art that I can take a break.”

Kai couldn’t help chuckling as he watched her skip off, her curls bouncing. Though he’d been furious with Jon initially, he just had to remember the way he felt every time he kissed her: complete, grounded, and no one else, nothing else mattered suddenly. Renee was a curious person, he could tell that much, but she never seemed to push him too hard. Not like Becca, who was constantly probing and demanding and insisting. Even when he knew he wasn’t fully in control, when he was with Renee, he didn’t feel panicky. Knowing she’d be there—ironically—was the only reason he’d finally agreed to help Art out. And now that he’d done it, seeing the look on her face as she watched him sign. . . .

Kai realized . . . he could love this girl.

“The break room: the height of romance,” Renee joked as she laid out their food.

Kai pushed a chair out of his way so he could pull into the table and help Renee. “I’m not much for traditional romantic gestures. Why be trite when you can be personal? Besides, I’m deathly allergic to pollen.”

“Is that your way of telling me I’ll never get flowers from you?”

“Real ones. Unless you don’t want to see me for a couple weeks afterward.”

Renee laughed as she unwrapped her sandwich. “You couldn’t take an antihistamine and live with watery eyes to make me happy?”

He smiled faintly, rubbed his chest absently. Honestly, he didn't know how he'd react with his new lungs. Before, a single flower could potentially kill him. But now? He knew dust didn't affect him as badly as before, though that could also be nerves still healing; his cough response wasn't what it used to be.

"If that was all it was, I could and I would." His heart began to race, and he had to hide his hands under the table as he felt them start to tremble. *No, please, not now.* The hydroxyzine he'd taken that morning as a precaution had probably worn off. He knew he needed to tell her about his transplant, his FS, but. . . . He had to redirect his thoughts before this bubble of anxiety turned into a full-blown panic attack. That's all he needed, with Renee and her front-row seat to the crazy show.

But then she leaned across the table to lay a hand on his arm, just for a moment, and it was like a wave of calm washed over him. He took a few breaths, looked up at her.

"Asthma?"

Kai swallowed. "Something like that. I told you there was more than the chair."

"Flowers are overrated anyway," she said, casting it off as if it genuinely weren't a big deal. It made Kai smile despite himself, and though he still felt a flurry of anxiety lingering in his stomach, Renee's open, honest, carefree acceptance made him feel better. "What's not overrated is you. You were fantastic."

Kai shrugged, grateful his hands were still so he could open his soup without spilling it everywhere.

"Really. I mean, I know the moms were gushing over you, even if I couldn't understand what they were saying. And one of the hearing moms told me you were a million times better than the last reader."

Kai stared at his soup, stirring it with his plastic spoon as a way to avoid her eyes. "Of course they're going to tell me I'm wonderful. The last time Art was able to do this was . . . four? five? months ago. They'll tell me I'm Jesus reincarnated if it means they'll have one Saturday morning a month they don't have to be at home with their children running around, driving them crazy."

Re sighed. "That's awfully cynical."

Kai shrugged. Tasted some soup. It had gotten cold, but he swallowed it anyway.

"Do you think . . . do you think I could learn?"

Kai finally looked up. "Learn what?"

"Sign language," Renee said, smiling, as if she'd wanted to add "silly" to the end of her sentence. She was so beautifully *happy* all the time. It would have been annoying if he didn't love that about her so much.

"Most hearies who say they want to learn pick up a couple signs." He demonstrated the "*I love you*" sign. "That doesn't mean what you think it does, by the way." He shrugged again. "And that's it. Maybe they learn a bit more, but they still basically sign English without caring about ASL grammar, usage, etc. Or learning anything about Deaf culture."

Renee almost literally deflated, and Kai remembered the other night in his car, when his anger had poured through despite his best efforts to contain it, feeling, again, like an asshole. Here was a woman who calmed his anxiety, who took his escalating amount of crazy in stride, who apparently wanted to learn ASL, and yet he had the portcullis down and the soldiers on the barricades, ready to fire.

He decided maybe it was time to turn down his cynic meter a few notches. "Do

you know the alphabet?”

Renee shook her head.

Kai laid his spoon down. “OK. Watch. I’m going to do it fast, first, then slow down and you can do it with me.” Kai blew through the alphabet, correcting her form when she didn’t get it quite right, reminding her to relax her hand—the irony of his telling someone else to relax not escaping him—until she’d gotten the hang of it, more or less. “Practice until you can do it without thinking, and hopefully be able to at least read when someone finger spells their name.”

“Do mine. My name.”

Kai smiled, then finger spelled her first and last name, showing her the signs for *name* and *last name*. Simplifying things for her by double-signing the “E’s” in “Renee” instead of sliding.

“Now yours.”

Kai felt his smile growing; Renee was leaned forward on the table, her eyes sparkling like a little kid’s, engaged, excited, and so incredibly kissable. Without thinking, Kai rapidly fingerspelled his first and last name.

“Whoa. If I didn’t know what you were doing, I’d never get that.”

Kai chuckled. “My name is really easy to fingerspell quickly, especially my first name; the letters all flow into each other. *K-A-I. F-O-X.*”

She squinted at him, as if assessing him, before sitting back and taking a few bites of her sandwich. Once she’d swallowed, she asked, “If you’re describing someone, do you really do ‘fat’ like you did in the story?” Renee demonstrated, looking adorable, her cheeks puffed out and her hands spread wide at her sides. “Or was that just for the kids?”

“Yes and no. ASL is a visual language. Where English would use a modifier like ‘really’ or ‘very,’ we convey it by the way we sign a word and in our facial expressions. So, like, ‘really tall’ would look like this,” he said, signing by holding his right hand up high above his head, his hand flat, shaking it a bit to emphasize the height, also expressing it on his face, his mouth opening to emphasize extreme height. “And ‘really short’ would be the same, only down here,” he said, using the same gesture but at table height, his facial expression shifting again. “That can also mean ‘little’ as in, ‘when I was little,’ but . . . you’ll learn ASL is heavily context-based.”

She observed him intently the whole time; he could almost see her brain working, absorbing the information greedily as she nibbled her sandwich. “What about colors. I picked up a few from watching you read *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, but . . .”

“Sure. *COLORS*,” Kai said, holding his spread hand above his mouth, wiggling his fingers slightly. Then he signed through the basic rainbow: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, purple, pink, white, black, gray, brown. First, to demonstrate, then again, slower, letting her mimic him, correcting her when necessary.

She picked up quickly, and Kai began to hope maybe she actually would learn, at least enough for basic conversation. His heart did a funny tango in his chest at the thought of being with a woman he could sign with. Even if he had to slow down, even if it wasn’t as smooth as it would be with a native signer. . . .

“So, if I wanted to describe you, I might say, *WOMAN, VERY-SHORT, THIN, HAIR BLACK CURLY, EYES GREEN.*” Kai signed slowly, speaking each word so she could clearly see.

“*HAIR?*” Renee asked, mimicking him, her fingers on her head as if she were picking up a piece of hair.

Kai nodded his fist. “YES.”

“OK, do you!”

Kai couldn't help chuckling at her childlike exuberance. “Well, I could cheat and just say, ‘man wheelchair,’” Kai said without signing. “But you wouldn't learn, would you? *MAN VERY-TALL, WHEELCHAIR, HAIR YELLOW!, EYES BLUE!*”

Renee laughed when he signed the colors, quick flicks of his wrist and his eyes bugging out. “That's the ‘very’ you were talking about before, isn't it?”

Kai nodded, smiling. “There's a sign for blond, but ‘hair yellow’ works.”

“OK, one more question,” Renee said, shifting in her seat. “I noticed you did this a few times during the reading.” She held her hand up on one side in a relaxed claw, palm up. “It looked like ‘what’ or ‘huh’?”

“Yes.” He drummed his fingers on the table, thinking. “If I wanted to ask you your name, I'd do it like this. *YOU NAME WHAT?*” He pointed to his eyebrows. “My eyebrows, and the way I lean forward, tell you I'm asking a question. Think of it kind of like the ASL equivalent of a question mark, or the inflection you do in spoken English: what is your name?” Kai said, adding a bit extra inflection to the end of the sentence to illustrate his point. “If I were asking a yes or no question, you'd know because my brows would be higher,” Kai said, demonstrating, making Renee laugh. “If I ask you something like that, you know all you need to say is ‘yes’ or ‘no.’” Kai demonstrated the signs for *yes* and *no* in turn. “Though it's polite to sign more than that, to show you're engaged in the conversation.” He shrugged. “ASL has a lot of body-language and facial-expression elements that indicate grammar.”

Renee's eyes widened. “Sounds so complicated.”

Kai shrugged. “It's really not. It's pretty intuitive, for the most part. It just seems that way once you start breaking it down. English is much, much more complicated.” He stared down at his soup, realizing he needed to eat more of it but not really wanting to. “But that's one reason most hearing people never really learn to sign well. They keep trying to think in English instead of remembering ASL is its own language with its own rules, and it's *visual*.”

Renee studied him a while, an elbow on the table, her hand supporting her head. Finally, she asked, “Do you think I could learn? Really learn?”

“*LEARN*.” Kai demonstrated the sign for *learn*, his left hand flat, his right pulling from it toward his head. “Yes. My hearing friend in high school learned from me, though he took classes later to improve his fluency. He's a certified interpreter now, so it's definitely possible.”

“How do you say ‘want’?”

Kai demonstrated, his palms up, as if grabbing something and pulling it toward him.

“*I really want to learn*,” Renee signed, doing her best to put her emphasis on the ‘want’ to show how much she wanted to learn.

A smile blossomed on Kai's face as a delightful warm feeling filled him, seeing her, after only a few minutes, put a full sentence together.

Yeah, he could definitely love this girl.

“What are you doing Halloween?” Kai blurted.

Renee tilted her head. “Uh, Diane wants me to go to this party the visual art students are throwing, but . . .” She shrugged.

Kai swallowed, reached for her hands. His heart was pounding in his chest, but he decided not to back down. “I volunteered to take some of the kids from the group

home where I grew up trick-or-treating at the hospital. Would you . . .” He swallowed, bit his lip. “Want to . . . come with me?”

Her face transformed into confusion and hesitation, pulling her hands away; it made his mostly empty stomach knot and swirl, his pulse at his throat racing so fast it had to be visible. “Yes,” she said, signing and speaking, smiling shyly before retaking his hands. “If you really want me there.”

Did he? Want her there? His first time back to County House in years, and he was going to bring Renee with him? “Yes.” He smiled, felt some of his anxiety fading away again as her thumbs stroked the tops of his fingers. “Yes. Yes.”

Jon was just finishing a sandwich and some coffee when he heard the door open, then close, and the slight creak of Kai’s chair as he rolled in. Jon looked up, wondering if he’d get the silent treatment from his brother—who’d been avoiding or ignoring him the past couple days. (Not that it was difficult, since Jon had been working nights most of the week.)

Kai pushed to the table, gliding into his usual spot across from his brother. He signed *hello*, then drew his pinky in a kind of sideways mirror-image of a “J” on his mouth, like he was drawing a lopsided frown. Jon’s old namesign that Kai had given him when he was little, because Jon rarely smiled and always looked worried. It may have been nearly twenty years since Kai had given his brother the nickname, but it was still pretty true to life. In Deaf culture, you never used a person’s namesign to address them (you simply pointed to indicate where the person was or where they’d been if they’d left the room), but Kai sometimes did it teasingly to emphasize how serious Jon was all the time.

Kai smiled, leaned forward with his elbows on the table, looking amusingly like a puppy waiting for his master to notice him so they could go to the park and play fetch.

Did this mean Kai was talking to him? “I guess everything at Lost Apple went well?”

Kai leaned back so he could sign. “*Renee wants to learn to sign. Really learn. I taught her some basics. She learns really fast.*”

Kai signed almost too rapidly for Jon to catch it, but his work with Megan over the past few weeks had apparently helped, and he was able to glean the meaning despite Kai’s excited, harried signing.

“The girl from the other night?” Jon decided to keep things vague in case that would clam Kai up again, and he wasn’t 100% sure how to sign it.

Kai nodded. “I’m still mad at you for sending her to PT, but I’m also glad you did, so we’ll call it a wash. Deal?”

“Deal.” Jon finished his coffee, checked his watch. He still had a few minutes before he needed to head in, and this was his first time in a while that Kai really felt like talking and wasn’t giving him monosyllabic or single-sign answers. “So this girl . . .”

“*She’s amazing. She’s just so . . . alive. Happy.*” Kai signed with enthusiasm, his excitement coming through with the intensity of his signs, the gleam in his eye that Jon had never seen before. “*She makes me feel . . . calm. Like I can do no wrong. She doesn’t push me or judge me or look at me . . . weird.*” Kai seemed to be choosing his signs carefully, as if he almost couldn’t believe what he was saying. “*I invited her to go with me to CH for Halloween.*”

Jon leaned forward, his eyebrows raised, his index finger drawing out from his mouth toward Kai. “*Really?!*”

Kai ducked his head, nodded his fist.

“That’s really great, Kai.”

“I also . . . may go to Deaf Halloween. It’s at the school. . . .”

“Wait.” Jon leaned forward, as if to see Kai better, his eyes narrowed. “You ended your boycott of Lost Apple, made yourself the center of a Deaf event, invited Renee to go to County House with you, and you’re planning on going to Deaf Halloween. After years of staying away from the Community. Who are you, and what have you done with my little brother?”

Kai gripped the edge of the table, used it to push and pull himself away and back toward it over and over. “Art needed help. Dr. Miller says I need to confront my past, and I got excited and invited Renee. And signing today made me remember how much I miss it. Making an appearance at the party won’t kill me.”

Jon pushed himself to his feet, carrying his plate and mug with him to the kitchen. “And this has nothing to do with Renee.” Jon looked over at Kai as he rinsed the items in the sink.

Kai shrugged, the hint of a smile playing at his lips. He rotated back, picking his casters up just a few inches off the floor, carefully balancing in place on his rear wheels. “You working Halloween night?”

Jon noticed Kai’s artful dodge, but said nothing, fishing out his meter and a clean lancet from a drawer and quickly pricking his finger and testing his blood. “Yeah. I get to be the consult for the ER, too. Yay.” Jon left his meter on the table and grabbed a vial of insulin from the fridge. He heard the clack of Kai’s casters hitting the ground. “Basically, I have the schedule from hell until mid November, plus I’m on-call Thanksgiving.” He filled a syringe, still waiting for the meter.

Kai twisted, Jon heard a zip. Some rustling. Then his brother turned back around, offering Jon a book he’d obviously taken out of his bag. Jon accepted it just as his meter beeped, so he left it on the counter while he quickly injected himself.

After tossing the used materials in the sharps bin he kept for the purpose and returning his insulin to the fridge, he examined the book closely, noticing Kai seemed to be silently waiting for Jon’s reaction. “Wow. *The Velveteen Rabbit*.” Jon flipped through the book, shaking his head. “I didn’t think you remembered.”

Just before Thanksgiving, 1983, Jon had woken in the middle of the night to find Kai unconscious, feverish, and barely breathing. It was the sickest Kai had been since he was a baby. Kai spent nearly a month in the hospital, most of the time sedated and on a ventilator, and even though Jon had only been 13, he’d understood how serious it was. Their father had been working nearly seven days a week to pay Kai’s medical bills, and their mother had been barely keeping herself together, hardly managing to take care of three-year-old Sara.

So it was Jon who sat with Kai—grateful Kai’s nurses allowed him to be alone with his brother despite his age—whenever he wasn’t in school, reading aloud to him for hours, like Inez would to Martin, not even sure if Kai could hear him or knew he was there, but needing to do *something*. To be there. And when Kai got a little better, he’d ask Jon to read him the “bunny book.” Every time. Jon nearly had it memorized by the time New Year’s came around.

Was this Kai’s way of saying, without words or signs, *Thank you for always being there?*

“I kept hoping the fairy would come and make me Real,” Kai said, not meeting his brother’s eyes, tracing a scratch in one of the cabinets with his thumbnail. “Because

then I could be like other kids. Like you and Sara. And Mom and Dad would love me.”

“Kai—”

“It’s fine, Jon,” Kai said, doing a 180 and heading out of the kitchen. “I just thought you might like a copy.”

Jon raced around, caught Kai before he could escape into the hallway, standing in the doorway to keep Kai’s attention and block his flight. He ignored the glare Kai gave him, which could have leveled a small continent. “Is that why you had me read it to you over and over and over?”

Kai shrugged. “Aren’t you going to be late for work?”

“I have time. Come over here. Don’t make me push you.”

Red had crept up Kai’s neck, but he followed Jon to the living room, saying nothing when Jon perched on the edge of the sofa, looking intently at him. Kai was mad now, but angry was better than shut down. Kai hated to be pushed—physically and emotionally—but if Jon had learned anything the past few weeks, it was that sometimes, that’s exactly what his brother needed.

“Our mother had problems, OK? It meant she wasn’t always there for us, as a mom, the way we needed. And it was like Dad was practically a single parent of four children, Mom included. But he loved you. He was so proud of you. Always.”

Kai blinked at Jon, but his anger had faded. He’d slipped on that mask, that infuriating affectation that made it impossible to know what he was thinking.

“Dad was the one who believed me when I insisted you weren’t retarded. He was the one who helped me fight to get you into the preschool program at the school for the deaf so you could learn ASL.” Jon pushed his fingers through his hair, wondering if he should continue. “He gave you this giant lollipop the first day you walked on your own, at home. It was so big, it made you lose your balance, and you fell. You cried, because you thought he’d take it away from you for falling.” Jon smiled faintly, remembering Kai, as a toddler, so proud of himself once he’d finally mastered his first pair of braces, supporting himself with a wheeled walker to help with his balance. “But he scooped you up and kissed away your tears, and hugged you tight, and then you shared the candy together.”

Kai’s mask dropped, looking a bit shell shocked. “*I . . . I don’t remember that,*” Kai said, shifting to ASL.

“*How could you? You weren’t even three.*”

“*You never . . . talk about them. About me, when I was little, before . . .*” Kai shook his head. “*I don’t remember . . . them.*”

“*So you remember me reading The Velveteen Rabbit to you, in the hospital, when you were five, but you don’t remember our parents?*”

A flash of hurt crossed Kai’s face before he quickly suppressed it. “I remember you,” Kai said in a small voice.

Jon sighed, staring at Kai’s hunched shoulders, his elated mood of earlier having completely vanished, trying to formulate what to say—or sign—next. His pager sounded, breaking the moment. Jon resisted checking it. “How about you keep the book. And I promise, we’ll talk later.” Jon took in a breath. “I’ll tell you another story from before. OK?”

Kai nodded.

“*I have to go. You’ll be OK? Don’t lie to me.*”

Kai offered a faint smile, nodded again. “*Thanks.*”

Kai’s brief sign—his hand flat, drawn out quickly from his lips—was simple, but

Jon knew, like the book, it meant more. Jon stood, squeezed Kai's shoulder as he walked by. *I love you, too*, Jon thought.

October 31, 2000

Kai grinned as soon as he saw Renee emerge from her apartment. She wore a red dress with white polka dots, a huge matching bow and big, black, round mouse ears on her head. She locked her door, then wrapped her arms around herself as the cold hit her. Her costume managed to be both adorable and sexy, but it wasn't exactly meant for late October in Northern Iowa. He honked his horn and flashed his lights, and she brightened as she rushed over, immediately jumping into the car and pulling the door closed.

"I could have come in."

Renee waved her hand. "No sense in you going through the trouble." She smiled. "Where's your costume?"

Kai glanced down at himself: he was wearing his usual clothing, a long-sleeved tee below a fleece pullover and jeans. He shrugged. "You look adorable enough for both of us."

She sighed, blushed as red as her dress. "Now I just feel silly. In New Orleans, Halloween is a big deal. Everyone dresses up. *Everyone*, and goes trick-or-treating, even adults." She shivered. "It's also a lot warmer."

Kai laughed, turned up the heat, then reached for her to pull her close. She accepted the kiss, sweet and pure as always, taking away some of his anxiety.

She rested her forehead against his for a moment, breathed deeply, then released it with a sigh of contentment. "Shall we?"

Kai pulled out of the parking lot and headed toward the hospital; County House wasn't far from JMH. As they drew closer to it, Kai felt the anxiety rising inside him like mercury in a thermometer and desperately hoped the combination of hydroxyzine and Renee's calming presence would prevent a full-blown panic attack. He'd gotten close a few times in the past month, but thus far had been lucky.

"So," Renee said after a while, interrupting the silence, "is there anything I should know before we get there?"

Kai sighed. "Like what?"

Renee shrugged. "You tell me."

Kai took a moment to consider. "Iowa has two places parents can dump their broken children," Kai said, his voice flat, though still bitter. "County House in the north and another in the south. CH is mostly kids who don't need constant nursing care."

"Wait, dump? I thought you were an orphan. I mean—"

Kai couldn't help smiling at Renee. She sat, curled up in the seat, tucking some of her curls behind her ear, making his chest ache just from a glance, from how beautiful she was, from knowing she was right beside him. "Orphan isn't a bad word, Re. My parents have been dead most of my life. But yeah. My parents were gone, but only about 40% of the kids at CH are orphans. A few were taken by CPS for various reasons. The rest are surrenders."

"Surrenders?"

"Kids whose parents decided they didn't want or couldn't afford to deal with a disabled kid." Kai shrugged, made the final turn toward the long road leading up to County House. "Parents give up their healthy kids all the time for all sorts of reasons. Being . . ." Kai bit back the "fucked up" he'd wanted to say, and instead said, "disabled is expensive; some kids need daily care." Kai held his breath as they pulled into the

parking lot—the place hadn't changed in the past four years, still looking solitary and forlorn, like an abandoned cabin you stumble upon in the woods. "My roommate was a surrender, and for a long time, I thought I was, too."

Kai felt Renee's hand on his thigh, and it instantly calmed the swirl of nauseous nerves in his stomach. He maneuvered into a parking spot near the front entrance. "Home sweet home."

Renee stared out at the forsaken-looking building, a dark-brick, characterless box that bore an uncanny resemblance to a large post office. What passed for landscaping surrounding the structure was overgrown, riddled with dying weeds from the cold, and obviously hadn't been tended properly in decades. Just the way Kai remembered it.

Renee waited in the warmth of the car, not saying anything immediately, until Kai had assembled his chair and transferred out. "Not one of Jonesville's finer architectural examples."

Kai chuckled as he locked the car and bumped up the curb.

"It looks like it was built in the 1950s."

"Yup. With the polio epidemics of the 1940s, suddenly a lot of poor farmers had kids that couldn't work and they couldn't support, so County House was built to house the ones who could breathe on their own. With the vaccine, the number of polio cases dropped, but there were still plenty of kids with other problems, so they were sent here."

"You know, for someone who claims he's failing history . . ."

"I know my town. Art's a bit of a history buff, when it comes to Jonesville and Iowa history, and he'd tell me about it, or bring me books. Besides, I learned all that before . . ." Kai cleared his throat, remembering he still had to tell Renee about his transplant. "My memory problems. We should head inside. You're freezing."

Kai held the outer door open for her, waving her in.

"Calhoun County House for—" Renee started to read aloud from the sign near the interior door: *Calhoun County House for Crippled, Diseased, and Feeble-Minded Children. Ring for admittance.*

"Just County House. Please." Kai pressed the buzzer.

Renee looked at him quizzically, but said nothing.

"A few years ago, there was a petition to rename all the public institutions. Go PC. But the state decided that it would cost far too much to change signage, paperwork, etc., so, yeah. Just County House."

Renee opened her mouth to comment, but she was interrupted by a harsh voice, bleeding through static, "Deliveries are Monday through Friday, eight to five, rear entrance. Visiting hours are Saturdays, ten to three, and office hours, weekdays, ten to five. Thank you."

Kai sighed loudly. "It's Kai Fox. Trick-or-treat?"

There was a painful scratch of static, then a buzz, and the door popped open. Before Renee could help, Kai pushed it the rest of the way, wheeling through and holding it for her. She smiled at him, but her eyes were searching, clearly taking in the place.

It amazed Kai how it still smelled the same: stale, depressing, with just a hint of disinfectant, though it looked like the staff had made genuine attempts to spruce up the lobby. *Don't feel bad, parents! Leave your disabled kid in the state's care. He'll love it here! See how happy everyone is?* Kai thought bitterly as they approached the front desk, where a large, staged MDA-telethon-worthy poster had been hung on the wall, a

group of kids a range of races and apparent disabilities grinning for the camera, with the words, *Calhoun County Cares About Kids!* printed in a disgustingly cheerful font at the bottom.

“Oh my God, it’s really you,” a voice called out, drawing both Renee and Kai’s eyes toward the back office, just off the front desk.

A pudgy woman with a tuft of white hair who looked like she should have retired ten years ago emerged. Cathy Evans, “The Warden,” as Kai and David called her, the woman who had essentially been cursed with running County House for the past forty years. She was part of the system, the ultimate authority figure all the kids had to bow to, and she’d never learned more than a handful of signs, but still, she cared in her own way, and she’d always done the best she could with the limited funds allotted to her.

She put her hands on Kai’s shoulders, appraising him. “Look at you. All grown up. I hardly recognize you. You’re a man now.”

Kai dipped his head, surprisingly embarrassed. He cleared his throat. “Ms. Evans, this is my friend, Renee. She’s going to help me with the kids. Are they ready?”

Cathy frowned. “I’m sorry, Kai. But you know I can’t let any of the children off the premises without a member of the staff, and with cutbacks . . . I can’t afford to spare anyone.”

“Dammit. Can’t you make an exception? It’s not like you’re handing them off to some stranger. And I’m taking them to Jonesville Memorial. If anything were to happen, we’re in a freaking hospital.”

Cathy crossed her arms on her chest, shook her head. “You and David. Always thought the rules shouldn’t apply to you if it wasn’t convenient.”

Kai’s anger flared, tempered only by the hydroxyzine, and he found he couldn’t think of the English words fast enough, his hands moving in harsh, rapid signs. “*It’s not about convenience, Warden.*” Kai’s hands slapped together loudly when he signed “*CONVENIENT*,” his face turning into a scowl. “*It’s about us giving these kids a smidgen of a real fucking childhood.*” Kai’s signs were jerking, intense, his chest heaving.

Cathy blinked, clearly not fully understanding him, but she recognized her “name sign” (if you could even really call it that), and the curse. Kai also knew she was familiar with *KIDS*, *REAL*, and *GROW-UP*. Enough she got the gist.

Kai felt Renee’s hand on his shoulder, and he forced himself to take a few slow, deep breaths. After a moment, he was able to find the English to say, “We’ll be back within the hour. Let the kids who can gather in the common room.”

“What did you say to her?” Renee asked as soon as they’d climbed back into Kai’s car.

“It’s not about rules; it’s about what’s best for the kids. Give them a taste of what normal children have. That’s why we’re going to Walmart, we’re buying candy and stuff we can use to play some party games, and we’re going to improvise Halloween.”

Renee stared at him. “Somehow, I suspect what you actually said was a lot angrier than that.”

Kai cracked a hint of a smile as they pulled out of the lot.

Renee was quiet a moment, watching the scenery fly past her window. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you that visibly mad.”

Kai sighed. “I shouldn’t have blown up at her, and I shouldn’t have dragged you into this. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I’m glad you wanted to include me in a part of your past.” She

grinned. “And it’s good to see you aren’t this inhuman android capable of suppressing your emotions all the time.”

Kai glanced sideways at her, felt himself relaxing more. If it weren’t for the fact that he didn’t want to disappoint the kids, he’d be tempted to just blow it all off, take her back to her place, and kiss her until they both were dizzy. “If I’m completely honest, I was hoping to convince Ms. Evans to let me take the kids even if she couldn’t spare anyone, and I can’t drive the van.” Kai tapped a finger on the hand controls to convey his meaning—the van didn’t have them. An easy, playful smile slipped onto his face.

Renee shook her head and bopped Kai on the shoulder.

“Hey! I’m driving here!” Kai said, laughing good naturedly, his bad mood completely gone. Their eyes met for a moment, and Kai had to sigh softly to himself at how unreal this all felt.

They laughed together, and when it finally faded, she asked, “Did you mean what you said? About giving these kids as close to a ‘normal’ Halloween as you can?”

Kai took in a breath, drummed his hand on the steering wheel. “I only got to go trick-or-treating once. The year before my parents died, my brother took me. I was the Incredible Hulk,” Kai said with a sad laugh. Kai was five, super excited, because it was the first time he’d been well enough and walking easily enough that his father had allowed it. Of course, he paid for it later that year with the bad case of pneumonia. “At County House, the only acknowledgement we ever got for holidays were tasteless, sugar-free cookies, and sometimes, if we had an enterprising volunteer, a few decorations.”

“Kai . . .”

Kai shrugged. “I got used to it, fast. But if I can do a little something for the kids . . .”

He caught the hint of her smile in his peripheral vision, but he was circling the Walmart parking lot, searching for a spot, not really able to focus on her. “Fucking old people,” he muttered. “Shouldn’t they be in bingo or at church or something this time of night?”

“If you want to drop me off, I can just run in . . .”

Kai smiled faintly. “It’s fine. If a spot doesn’t open up in the next couple minutes, I’ll park down toward the end of the row, on the line. That’ll give me space enough to transfer. One good thing about the chair; I don’t need to park close.”

“This is so weird,” Renee said, leaning on the cart handle, observing idly as Kai sorted through the remnants of the candy.

“Shopping with someone in a wheelchair?” Kai asked absently, tossing a bag into the basket.

“Shopping with you. A few days ago, you were avoiding me, yet here we are.”

Kai pushed farther down the aisle, coasting, scanning the decimated shelves; she suspected it was his way of avoiding eye contact. “Here we are.”

Renee abandoned the cart for now, approaching him from behind; he seemed too focused on digging through a pile of random stuff—honestly, the Halloween aisle looked like the remnants of a campsite after being torn apart by hungry bears—and she got this strange sense of déjà-vu. The other night, when she’d gone home with him after surprising him in PT, and he’d tried to hide by putting away their leftovers.

Hesitantly, she laid a hand on his shoulder, just barely touching him. She felt him tense instinctively, then force himself to relax. “Do you even still want me here? Now that you don’t . . .” She swallowed. “. . . need me anymore?” She hesitated a

moment, then added, "To drive?"

Kai sighed, gripped the edge of the shelving to help himself turn around. He looked up at her, not speaking for a long time. "Part of me wants to say yes. It was one thing to have you help me take the kids around the hospital, another for you to . . . really see what was basically my childhood."

Renee dropped her head, nodded. "I can help you finish up here, or I can just go. Call a friend or catch a bus or something."

Kai reached out, grabbed her wrist, but held it loosely between his thumb and index finger, as if he were afraid to break it. It sent a reflexive shiver through her body she hoped he couldn't sense. "True, I don't need you," he said, staring at her wrist, stroking the underside softly with his rough thumb. It made the shiver more intense, and she had to fight not to pull away. No man had ever made her feel like this, a simple, innocent touch sending the nerve endings in her body firing in a mad frenzy. "But I want you," he finally finished, looking up at her, his eyes wide and sincere.

Without thinking, Renee braced one hand on his shoulder, leaned forward, and kissed him. She felt him immediately melt into her, a hand reaching back to grip the shelving to keep them steady. A warmth filled her when she felt his smile, but evaporated when he pushed her away only a moment later. Her eyebrows dipped in hurt and confusion, but Kai's grin was still there, beautiful and genuine, his eyes soft and uncharacteristically unguarded.

He sighed softly. "We have to hurry up and get back. Light's out is nine, and they put some of the kids to bed earlier than that. I doubt Ms. Evans could convince any of the staff to push bedtime routines up even thirty minutes, even for Halloween." Kai dropped his hands to his rims and expertly swiveled out from between Renee and the shelf. "Bakery, then checkout. Come on."

Renee watched him as he pushed toward the grocery portion of the store, occasionally spinning around and smiling at her before turning back and continuing to lead the way. She became distracted, watching the muscles in his neck, shoulders, arms, as he moved, wanting desperately to wrap her arms around him, kiss a line down his ear, jaw, neck, shoulder. . . .

". . . pie for the kids who can't do cookies?" Renee realized Kai had been speaking to her.

"What?"

He spun around, looked up at her quizzically, wheeled backwards as he repeated himself, "I thought, get them some real cookies and maybe pie for the kids who need something easier to eat."

"Uh, sure," Renee said, following him to the bakery, not really understanding. But this was Kai's show anyway; she was just supporting cast.

Kai paused at a display of the remnants of Halloween treats. "Or cupcakes. . . . Oh, man. We *never* had cupcakes." Kai began filling the cart with a variety of baked goods, his eyes lighting up as if he were a little kid getting these rare treats.

Watching him made Renee's stomach ache. Is this where some of that penetrating sadness she saw far too often in his eyes came from? "You really grew up in that place?"

Kai sighed, wheeling to another table. "Yes. It was 'home' for twelve years."

Renee did some quick math. She knew Kai was 22; that meant he'd spent more than half his life there. No wonder he had issues. "Was it really bad?"

"County House?" Kai finally spun around to face her in one smooth movement.

Truthfully, she missed his height, but she had to admit she loved the way he moved in his wheelchair, her stomach doing funny knotting things watching him glide over the floor.

"Yeah." She barely got the word out; she wanted to climb in his lap, pull off his shirt, and kiss every patch of his skin. The thought made her blush, and she hoped he didn't notice.

"Everything's relative," Kai said cryptically, offering her a forced smile. "That should do it; we should head back before it gets too late."

A couple hours later, the festivities were winding down. Renee stood, leaning against the far wall of the common room, beside Cathy, watching Kai playing a kind of blind man's bluff with the younger kids.

"He's so good with children," Renee mused. "You should have seen him the other day, reading to the kids in sign language."

"Hmm. He and his roommate always kept to themselves. Although Kai integrated more with the other children than David. It was a relief for the staff when David turned 18, but it was hard on Kai. It's good to see him happy."

Kai's feet nudged the wheel of one of the other kid's chairs, and the girl burst out laughing. "Hmm. I think I found something, but it's awfully giggly." He reached his hands out until he found the child, tickling her, causing her to squeal. Finally, he opened his eyes. "Madison?"

She nodded enthusiastically, apparently delighted Kai remembered her name. She looked like she was about six, and from the way her limbs seemed bent at odd angles, Renee suspected cerebral palsy. There'd been a girl at Renee's school who'd had it, along with a personal aide hired by her family to help her through classes. She'd been smart, but severely disabled, and though Renee hadn't actively avoided her, she hadn't been sure how to approach her or deal with her, especially since the girl had a severe speech impediment.

Madison apparently did too, her smile fading as she struggled to say something. Renee watched as Kai leaned closer, all his focus on the girl. He nodded, whispered something Renee couldn't hear, then leaned back. She saw him smile, gesture to his neck like he was turning a key, then wink at Madison.

The rest of their conversation was mimed—Renee wasn't sure if Kai was using sign language or simple gestures, but even she could understand the point he was making. He was letting Madison be "It," to her obvious delight.

Madison struggled to maneuver her wheelchair, partially because it was so large for her, but also partially because her CP evidently limited her range of movement. Kai positioned himself behind her, surreptitiously pushing her to help her along when she would get particularly frustrated.

The game went on like that for a while, one child switching with another, Kai helping where he could or was needed, until a few staff members started rounding them up for bed to a chorus of whines and boos.

Kai pushed toward Renee and Cathy once most of the children had been herded out. "Madison should be in a power chair. Or at least a manual chair that fits her."

"She'll grow," Cathy said in a quiet, yet authoritative voice.

"It's too heavy and too big. She can barely move in it. She's a child, not a doorstep." Kai's eyes burned into Cathy's, and as she had the other day in PT, with Troy,

Renee suspected there was more to this argument than what she heard on the surface. Would she see more of his earlier anger come out?

“If you’d like to provide the several *additional* thousand dollars per child per year that I need in my budget to provide such things, perhaps you can donate it and we can both hope the state won’t take it all for another more ‘important’ project.” Cathy smiled and blinked at Kai, unfazed by his anger.

Kai sighed, the tension in his shoulders relaxed, and he leaned back. “I’m sorry. I know you do your best with what you have. I just—”

Cathy nodded. “I see you got yourself a good chair now, though.”

Renee looked between them, curious what Cathy meant. Kai had explained how his mobility changed constantly. Had Kai related to Madison’s struggle with a bulky, heavy chair that didn’t fit him properly? Yet another thing for the “Ask Kai Later” list.

Kai looked down reflexively. “Gift from my brother.” He spun around in a tight circle, as if to demonstrate its nimbleness, and Renee’s stomach fluttered a bit watching him.

Cathy smiled a complex, tired smile that Renee couldn’t quite interpret. “It was good of you to drop by. The kids really had fun tonight.” Then she laughed quietly. “I’ll admit I never thought I’d see you ever again.”

Kai waved his hand between them, central fingers folded, thumb and pinky extended, pointing between himself and Cathy. Renee recognized it as the sign *SAME*; essentially, in this context, it was the ASL equivalent of “ditto.”

“The kids would love it if you came by another day.”

Kai glanced over at Renee for the first time; she’d almost begun to think he’d forgotten her, or she’d somehow mastered the art of camouflage and blended in with the wall. He took her hand, squeezed her fingers, smiled up at her. “I might do that.”

“That was really sweet of you,” Renee said as she helped Kai load the remnants of the party in the back of his car; Cathy wouldn’t let them leave anything, much to Kai’s chagrin.

Kai shrugged. “Just living vicariously.” Kai raised his brows up and down, Marx-brothers style, and stole a cupcake out of one of the containers, eating it in two bites.

Renee laughed, shaking her head, leaning forward to wipe off some frosting from the side of his mouth. Then she gave in and licked the spot, kissing him. He tasted like sugar—he’d had as much candy and sweets as any of the kids, and she wondered how he wasn’t bouncing off the walls. The kiss was short, but wonderful, ending when Kai evidently felt Renee’s shiver.

“Come on, let’s get you warm.” He handed her his keys.

Renee hurried around to the passenger’s seat, climbing in and starting the engine, feeling the shift of the car as Kai closed the trunk. She was slowly beginning to defrost when she heard a knock on his window. Looking over, she saw him point to the lock, his eyebrows raised, making him look like a sad puppy.

Laughing at them both, since she’d neglected to unlock his door when she’d gotten in, she leaned over and did so, giving her an inadvertent peek at how his hand controls worked. She could see the lever leading down with bars that connected to each pedal. He also had what looked like a removable foot guard blocking off the pedals. She made a mental note to ask him about it at some point, but figured it must be a way to make sure his leg spasms wouldn’t cause an accident.

Renee watched as Kai hurried to pull himself in, disassembling his chair quickly to minimize how long the door was open to the cold. He didn't seem bothered by it, even though he was only wearing a light fleece pullover, but she knew Kai was both an actor (who only revealed what he wanted) as well as a native. After all, it wasn't even November; things would get much, much colder than this. Renee couldn't help, though, if her body still remembered New Orleans winters where 40 was considered abysmally frigid.

"You warm enough?" Kai asked her tenderly as soon as his chair was secure in the back seat and the door was shut.

Renee nodded, but she shivered.

Kai laughed, held up a finger, and pulled his fleece off over his head. It temporarily made the T-shirt he wore underneath ride up, exposing part of his stomach and chest, where Renee saw the hint of several scars. But before she could get a good look, the moment was over, and he was handing her his sweatshirt.

She smiled, threaded her hands through the arms and hugged it close without pulling it over her head. It smelled faintly of him, and still retained the warmth of his body. Renee's eyelids fell halfway in pleasure for a moment before Kai's gentle laugh brought her back.

"Keep it if you want."

"I meant what I said before," Renee said as Kai drove out of the parking lot. "It was sweet of you to do this, and especially the way you handled Madison, turning off your voice so she didn't feel bad."

Kai shrugged a single shoulder. "I'm not sure if I was clear about this before, but I was mute when I was a kid. I couldn't speak." His eyes darted sideways, perhaps expecting Renee to have some huge negative reaction to this, before returning back to the road. "That's why I know ASL. I didn't learn to talk till I was fourteen."

"Wow. You speak so well. I never would have guessed." Perhaps that explained his angry signed outburst earlier; he hadn't switched to ASL so Renee wouldn't understand him, as she'd originally assumed. Instead, she wondered if it was because, when he was furious or tired, his brain defaulted to his first language. Renee had relatives like that, remembering many a family gathering with heated arguments in barely intelligible Cajun French. It also explained why he remembered better when she helped him visualize the material. With their midterm coming up, she'd have to keep that in mind.

"Lots of speech therapy and being thrown into a high school where most of the teachers forced me to talk," he responded. He rolled his shoulders, as if he were sore or stiff. "Anyway, I understand what that's like, struggling to communicate." He smiled, but it was one of his complex grins that meant much more than it seemed. "I have a lot of experience in getting people to understand me, when necessary, without speaking."

Renee snaked her hand onto his thigh, relieved when he smiled, not shirking from her touch. "Is that why you're such a good kisser?"

He let out a short, rich, genuine laugh. "I'm really skilled at other forms of nonverbal communication," he said slyly. "And I think you already know I'm good with my hands."

Kai pulled up in front of Renee's apartment, parked. "Thanks for your help tonight."

Renee shrugged. "It was definitely a different way to spend the holiday."

"We do have the best dates, don't we? PT, orphanage for disabled kids. Next

time I should take you to a nursing home. Complete the awkward dating triumvirate.”

Renee laughed, shook her head. She took Kai’s right hand, smoothing her thumb on his palm. “I like you because you aren’t like other guys.”

“Yeah, the wheelchair sort of sets me apart,” he said, but he was smiling at her.

Renee leaned over, laid a hand on his chest. Kai’s heart sped up; he hadn’t told her about his transplant, his FS, yet, other than his vague admission about his allergies, though he knew he couldn’t let it go like he had with his MLS. If he lost her because of it, it would be better to do it sooner, before he got too involved. “You have a good heart,” she said with a sweet smile. “Art was right about that.”

Kai echoed her expression, holding her hand in place. “We should have a proper first date. . . . Though I’m afraid I’m not real experienced with conventional dating.” He felt the beginnings of a blush but forced himself not to hide from her.

She climbed onto her knees so she could lean over better, stole a quick but intense kiss that left him dizzy and half hard in seconds. “I just want to be with you. I don’t care what we do. Surprise me.”

“OK. Sunday?” Kai took in a deep breath. “And we’re still on for studying tomorrow after class, and Thursday afternoon, so long as the bookstore’s not busy, right?”

“Yes,” Renee said, “but you’ll do fine.”

Kai looked away, picked at the steering wheel with his thumb. “Says the girl with the A+. If I bomb the midterm, there’s no way I’ll be able to pass history. I’ll have to wait until next fall, and I won’t be able to take World History II next semester . . .”

Renee sank down onto her calves, still facing him. “OK. Mini pop quiz. What year was the Magna Carta signed?”

“Uh . . . 1000 something? No. 1100?”

Renee shook her head. “1215.”

Kai let his head fall to his hands on the wheel. “See: I can never remember the dates.”

“Kai. Look at me.”

Reluctantly, he did.

“Sign that date for me.”

Kai’s eyebrows furrowed, but he obeyed, signing, “*TWELVE FIFTEEN.*”

“Good.” Renee mimicked him. “What was the Magna Carta?”

“Re—”

“Come on. If you get it right, I’ll kiss you. Is that incentive enough?”

Kai rolled his eyes, but he was smiling. “Uh, like the Bill of Rights for England, right?”

Renee’s eyebrows went up, smiling encouragingly. “*MORE.* The Magna Carta inspired the founding fathers, definitely.”

Kai squeezed his eyes closed, trying to think. Kai signed slowly to speak the English, too, for Renee’s sake, “*It limited the king’s power?*”

“*GOOD.* And who was the king?”

Kai’s brows furrowed. He could feel the topic beginning to escape him. He looked at Renee, waiting so patiently for him to answer, wondering if he should admit he couldn’t remember what they were talking about. He knew she was quizzing him for history, and the year 1215 was clearly visible, in sign, in his mind, but beyond that. . . .

“It’s OK,” she said, smoothing his arm, obviously sensing his anxiety and confusion. “Think *Robin Hood.*” She grinned as she began to sing, “Too late to be known

as John the First; he's sure to be known as John the Worst. A pox on the phony king of England!"

Kai laughed, but that didn't help stir his memory.

"KING?" Renee signed, mimicking him from earlier, a "K" drawn down from her left shoulder, across her torso to her right waist, her eyebrows questioning. When he nodded that she was right, she continued, fingerspelling "John," then doing the sign for *write* to indicate "signed," then fingerspelled "Magna Carta" slowly. "WHEN?"

Without thinking, Kai immediately responded, "1215." Then what had happened hit him and his head jerked up, a smile slipping onto his face.

"Guess you earned that kiss, huh?"

Kai pulled her close, kissing her deeply, intensely, pouring his gratitude and amazement at having someone like Renee, who was smart and beautiful and patient. Who was learning to sign and willing to do whatever she could to help him, fucked up brain and everything. His heart was in his throat, a light, feathery feeling that almost felt like a blood pressure crash, but which he realized was happiness: pure, undiluted, and amazing.

"You sure you can't come inside?"

Kai sighed, shook his head. "But I'll see you tomorrow."

Renee let out an adorable whine of complaint, stealing another kiss before sitting back. She tugged at Kai's fleece, which she'd slipped on the rest of the way earlier in the drive. "I'll keep this as collateral."

Kai let out a loud, freeing laugh that felt enormously good. Part of him wanted to invite her to the party, an excuse to spend a few more hours with her, but she'd be totally out of place without knowing much ASL, and if Kai did run into David again, he wanted their conversation to be private. "Night, Re," he said in a voice he almost didn't recognize as his own, quiet, longing.

"Night," she said as she looked back at him before climbing out, the light from the building's lamps casting a halo over her dark curls, pulling out her auburn highlights and perfectly framing her face.

"Night," he said one last time, even after the door had shut, his eyes following her as she unlocked her apartment and slipped in with a final wave and a smile.

Kai leaned back in the seat, letting out a long breath. *Fuck*. Only a few days since Renee walked in on him in PT, and already he was falling for her. Dizzying, head-over-heels, merry-go-round love.

Vicky and Jon stood in his office, kissing hungrily. They clung to each other, desperate to take the kiss farther, but Jon only had ten more minutes before he needed to get back to work. Vicky guided Jon toward the couch in his office, pushing him back. He resisted at first, but finally fell down into it. She quickly followed, reaching to undo his belt.

"Vic," he gasped as she stroked him through his pants. "We can't."

"We can't, but *I* can," she said, freeing his aching, leaking cock and stroking it a few times gently before taking him in her mouth.

Jon grunted at the warm wetness of her tongue as it caressed him, letting his eyes fall shut, unable to speak any more complaints. He hadn't experienced many blow jobs before Vicky—Jenny, for example, had considered fellatio unsanitary—but Vic was not only fond of giving them, she was good at it.

"*I like the sounds you make when I have you in my mouth,*" she'd told him. "*So uncharacteristic. It drives me crazy.*"

Jon started making some of those noises as she licked and sucked the head, long strokes then little flicks of her tongue, making him whimper and thrust into her, desperate for more sensation. She rewarded him, taking him deeper, letting him hit the roof of her mouth. He felt the tightness in his belly and knew he was close, pressing against her shoulder.

“Vic, Vic, I’m going to come.”

She sucked hard up his length, releasing just as he let out a shout, shooting into her hand, which she cupped over his tip to try to catch the mess. His stomach spasmed a few more times, and then he was still, the rush of post-orgasmic relaxation sweeping over him.

“You’re terrible,” he sighed.

“Terrible?” she asked, teasingly, getting up to plant a lazy kiss on the side of his mouth. “Or terribly awesome?”

She used some tissues to clean her hand and him, and he tucked himself back in, hoping he could enjoy a few minutes with her before he had to get back.

“You’ll be very relaxed for the rest of the night now, I hope.”

Jon laughed softly. “I’m going to have a lot to make up for when my crazy schedule is finally over, aren’t I?”

“Mmm hmm. Have you given any more thought to Thanksgiving at my family’s?”

Jon sighed. “I don’t want to leave Kai alone. It’s not fair to him. Last year he was still so close to his transplant, we couldn’t really celebrate too much. I know he’s always wanted to do the whole traditional dinner thing.”

Now it was Vicky’s turn to sigh. “I’d invite him, too, but I’ll assume he’d decline.”

Jon shrugged. “You’ll have to ask him yourself, but Kai doesn’t like large groups of strangers much. And don’t you have like seventeen brothers and sisters?”

Vicky squeezed Jon playfully. “Ha ha. Seven. But yeah, I have a huge family. If you decide to come, I’ll need to make you a yearbook-style guide just so you can keep track.”

“Not being very convincing right now. Did I mention Kai’s not the only one who doesn’t like crowds?”

Vicky opened her mouth to retort, but was interrupted by Jon’s pager.

He shifted so he could take it off his belt and check it. Jon groaned when he saw the number. “The ER. Probably another kid who aspirated a candy corn or one of those stupid plastic spiders. I’ve gotta go.”

Vicky sighed, kissed him quickly on the lips. “Guess I’ll head home, then. I’m exhausted.”

“Drive safe,” Jon said, standing and offering his hand to help pull her up. “Call or page me when you get home, so I know you got there OK. I might not be able to answer, but I’ll talk to you tomorrow. I’ll probably still be here when you get in in the morning.”

“Take care of yourself, OK?” Vicky said, kissing Jon one last time before accepting a hug. Jon loved how right her body felt against his, and though he’d teased her, he’d brave hundreds of hostile relatives if that’s what it took to be with her.

The party was apparently in full swing by the time Kai arrived, and he ended up having to park in the far back corner of the secondary lot, hoping he wouldn’t get boxed in. He

grabbed the earplugs he'd purchased at Walmart earlier—with all the other junk, Renee hadn't even noticed, and stuffed them in each ear, hoping they'd suffice to insulate him from the epically loud music he knew would greet him once he made it inside the school's gym.

Then he popped open his glove compartment and pulled out a pair of leather gloves; if he was going to wheel all the way in the cold and manage to have his fingers limber enough for signing once he got to the party, he needed to be prepared. He slipped them on, sucked in a breath, and pushed the door open, an icy wind hitting him in the face. The temperature had dropped significantly since he'd been out earlier with Renee, a cold front that threatened to bring with it the first legitimate ice storm of the season.

Kai twisted, pulled out the pieces of his chair one by one and quickly attached the wheels to the frame. He could already feel the cold seeping through his jeans, and he hadn't even transferred yet. It wasn't too late to change his mind and go home, but the prospect of being among an entire party full of native signers, and maybe, as terrifying as the idea was, running into David again, forced him to pull himself out of the car and into his chair, adjusting his legs, leaning over to pull down his jeans to minimize the chance the wind would bite his skin.

This far out, the parking lot was unpaved, a mixture of flattened, dying grass and bits of gravel, meaning every few feet Kai had to lean back and wheelie to prevent his casters from getting stuck. It was harder work, but it kept him warm until he reached the main parking area with its smoother asphalt. This close, Kai could already sense the music, even if he couldn't quite hear it with the earplugs. If he really was going to get back in the Community and start going to more Deaf events, he was going to have to invest in better hearing protection than 2/\$1 at Walmart.

It was even stranger, in some ways, to be rolling around the grounds of the school for the deaf than it had been returning to County House. Kai had left CH behind only four years ago, but the last time Kai was heading toward this gym was 1992. Nothing had changed, except everything looked a little more rundown, the cracks in the sidewalk leading toward the gymnasium larger. The pathway had been decorated for the holiday with graves and skeletons and pumpkins, with a large banner draped over the doors, announcing *Happy Halloween* in fingerspelled handshapes.

Kai spotted a few stray people hurrying inside, costumes concealed by coats and jackets. Kai took in a deep breath. Still time to turn back, but he felt something in his stomach—excitement?—that made him press forward, pulling the heavy doors open and squeezing inside.

The shock of the cold burning off hit him, mixed with the intense bass that he could feel rattling his chair. It was like a sauna inside, between the heat and all the dancing bodies, but Kai spotted a coat check off to his left, so he drifted over, pulling off his gloves and then his coat, stuffing them in the pocket.

It was strange, yet wonderful when the attractive young girl—who looked like she was still in high school—greeted him in sign, welcoming him to the party, wishing him a happy Halloween, and taking his coat in exchange for a claim ticket. She also reminded him that they were raising money to paint the gym and resurface the floor, so he could donate, or all proceeds from the food and beverages were also going toward those projects.

“Did you go to school here?”

“Class of '96,” Kai responded, which was true, even if he graduated from Jonesville High instead.

She smiled. *“Welcome back!”* And offered him an alumni Halloween button.

Kai smiled and thanked her, waiting until he’d wheeled off before shoving it in the pouch behind his legs. He scanned the room, wondering if this was a mistake. Being in the chair put him at an automatic disadvantage at any party, but particularly one in which most of the communication happened literally over his head.

He wandered around, carefully weaving through the crowd, getting a few looks from people obviously wondering who he was. Perhaps he’d changed too much for any of his former classmates to recognize him. Wouldn’t necessarily be a bad thing. Half the crowd was sandwiched together on the dance floor, the rest gathered in circles along the sides, engaged in animated conversations. Everyone was in costume of some kind.

Kai was debating getting a drink when he saw someone frantically waving at him; at first, he assumed the woman had to be trying to get someone else’s attention behind him, so he swiveled, only to realize when he turned back around that she had been trying to signal him after all.

She was tall, narrow, blond and bubbly, a cheerleader or soccer-mom type, though she was about his age, dressed in a 1950s poodle-skirt. *“Kai? Dr. Taylor’s brother?”*

Kai’s eyebrows dipped as he nodded his fist in a yes.

The woman practically exploded into a smile, literally jumping up. *“I’m Megan Younger! I’m tutoring your brother in ASL. You look so much alike!”*

Oh. The idea of Jon learning ASL from someone so . . . effervescent was amusing.

“Where’s your costume?”

Kai looked down, an evil thought popping into his head, before returning eye contact. He indicated his wheelchair. *“This is my costume.”*

Her eyes widened for a moment, clearly not sure what to do.

Kai sighed; messing with Megan was even crueller than messing with Pam the other day. *“I’m joking.”*

Her face transformed as she battled between laughing and being intensely uncomfortable. *“You’re terrible. You remind me of my fiancé.”* She glanced around, signaled to someone.

Soon, a broad-chested man, about Megan’s height—which made him shorter than most of the men at the party, and definitely shorter than Kai if he were standing, pushed his way through toward them. He had a shock of red hair cropped short so that it stood up, and he also was uncostumed.

Kai drifted backwards a few inches. The man before him had changed a lot in the intervening years, but there was no denying it. *“David?”* he said, mouthing the name while signing *WRONG* on his chin, Kai’s private name sign for David he’d given him when they’d first met at County House. Kai had been scared, not feeling well, and upset, recently separated from everyone he knew, placed in a home where no one knew his language. Until David had drawn his attention and looked at Kai, eyebrows drawn down in concern and question, his hand in the handshape identical to *SAME*, knuckles on his chin, asking Kai, *“What’s wrong?”* In that instance, Kai’s world changed: suddenly, he wasn’t isolated and alone anymore, because he had a boy his age who knew sign.

A brother. *“Kai!”* David echoed after a blink of shock, greeting Kai with his own original name sign, a variation on the sign for *BROTHER*, a K drawn down from his forehead to his “L”-shaped hand.

Before Kai could take in another breath, David dropped to his knees and

embraced Kai tightly, as if trying to squeeze the life out of him. As uncomfortable as David's intense grip was, the hug felt like coming home. Jake had taught Kai in his first few days in the hearing world that hearing people do *not* like to be touched, and men do *not* hug. It was a huge wake up call for Kai, who was used to the Deaf norms where touching was not only allowed, but necessary. If you ended a conversation without a hug, the other person would be deeply offended.

Kai choked, and finally, David released him, crouching to keep at eye level, grasping Kai's face and studying it for a few minutes. David's eyes were full of emotion, and when he finally pulled back to sign, he wiggled his fingers in the air as if he couldn't even find the words.

"God! You're still alive! I thought you were **dead!**" David didn't use the euphemism sign *PASSED-AWAY*, but instead fingerspelled the word, sharp, intense movements, practically throwing the final "D" in the air for added emphasis.

Kai shrugged, smiled.

David let out a long breath. "*You look great. Healthy. You've gained weight! But you're not walking anymore.*" Ah, that was something else Kai had missed: Deaf bluntness. Another cultural difference Jake had tried to teach him, though that had been a hard one for Kai to overcome: Deaf people told it like it was, getting straight to the point. It wasn't considered rude to be honest. It was baffling, at first, to Kai, how hearing people used so many words because telling the truth was considered rude. *A culture of lying*, Kai had explained to David after his first few months at the hearing school.

Before Kai could reply, Megan tapped David on the shoulder to draw his attention. He stood back up, visibly annoyed, though he tried to contain it for her sake. "*You two know each other?*"

David's eyes darted to Kai's before he replied, "*We went to school together, but Kai transferred to a different high school, so we haven't seen each other in six years.*"

Kai noticed David didn't mention County House, so he said nothing. In fact, Kai wondered if Megan even knew about CH. Just because Deafies could be blunt didn't mean they couldn't withhold information. Kai and David were alike in that way: what someone didn't know couldn't hurt *you*.

"*We've got a lot of catching up to do,*" David explained to Megan. "*Think we'll go somewhere private to talk.*" He gestured with both splayed hands, fingers pointing toward him to indicate all the prying eyes privy to their conversation. "*I'll find you later? OK?*" He kissed his fiancée's cheek, even though Kai could see in her face she was less than thrilled by his hasty exit and lackluster explanation. Kai was pretty certain David didn't greet everyone the way he had Kai, and Megan had to suspect there was more to the story.

She reluctantly disappeared into the crowd, and once she was gone, David looked Kai over again. "*Who are you supposed to be?*"

"*Tony Hawk after he missed a major trick,*" Kai signed facetiously, mimicking a skater taking a really bad fall, his facial expressions following the journey to the final splat. He furrowed his brows, pointed at David. "*You?*"

David laughed. He pulled on his white T-shirt. "*White shirt and jeans to go with Megan's Grease theme. Told her it was the closest thing to a costume I'd do.*"

Kai signed in acknowledgement, nodding the handshape for *SAME*. "*Can we go somewhere to talk?*"

David looked around, then nodded, signaled for Kai to follow.

David led the way through the crowd, glancing back every couple minutes to make sure Kai was still behind him. They wove through the groups gathered around the food and beverage tables, circles of chatting people grateful for a place to rest their drink while they signed.

David exited the gym, immediately feeling the shift in air temperature. The vibration of the music began to fade as he headed down a hallway toward a classroom with an easily pickable lock. He pulled his keys from his pocket, flipped till he got to his tools, crouched, and in a minute had the door open. He grinned, waving Kai inside.

Kai just shook his head, but he was smiling.

David pulled a desk toward the center of the room and sank into it, leaning back. He watched Kai roll in, moving smoothly to face him. It shocked David how much Kai had bulked up since they'd last seen each other. He was wearing a long-sleeved T-shirt a size too big, but David could still see the outline of strong shoulders and biceps as Kai maneuvered his chair. The skinny little "brother" David remembered was gone, and though he worked out regularly, he wondered if Kai would beat him on the bench press or chin-ups. Maybe he should have unlocked the weight room instead so they could have found out.

David never could resist a contest.

But then it hit him: his little "brother" really was here, in front of him, alive. So very *alive*. Kai looked better than ever, and for a moment, David was transported back sixteen years to the day they first met.

David had landed at County House after a disastrous series of foster homes and a failed year of hearing kindergarten in which he'd been placed in Special Ed as they'd attempted to teach him English. *Mouth-movers*, he'd thought of hearing people, because they were always looking at him, their mouths moving, moving, moving, sometimes trying to get him to make his mouth move, too, though he could never figure out exactly why. His father—whom he'd thought of as *Red-neck* because that's what would happen to him whenever his mouth moved in large motions, spit flying, teeth showing, usually right before he slapped David's cheek—had tried over and over to get David to imitate him. Pointing to something and moving his lips, then encouraging David to repeat the motion, holding David's fingers to his throat because apparently forcing air out when you moved your mouth was part of the game.

David loved games, but that was never one he liked. Because he could never win it. He couldn't understand why the mouth-movers wagged their lips and blew air out, when pointing and gesturing made so much more sense. David's mother—whom he'd thought of as *Smiley-warm-nice-smell*—had understood that, and she had never made him imitate the mouth-movers. But she went away one day and never came back.

County House was a strange place. The good thing was he'd finally gone to a school where there were no mouth-movers; instead, everyone there was a hand-mover, and over the past year he had learned that there were signs for things. Like Red-neck was his "half-man," thumb of his spread hand only touching his forehead instead of also going down to his chest. *Father*, they'd taught him. And Smiley-warm-nice-smell, even though she'd gone away, was his "half-woman," thumb only on his chin. *Mother*.

David still didn't always understand the other hand-movers, because they used signs for things he didn't know, but he learned quickly, because this was a game with rules he could comprehend.

But he was the only hand-mover at County House. No one tried to make him

like them, but they still wagged their lips at him, and the white-haired lady always seemed to be angry with him. He wondered if it was because he was supposed to try to imitate her but he wasn't. But he didn't want to play that game again, never again.

He'd only had a couple weeks of kindergarten, and he was older than the other kids in his class, because he was still learning to sign, when he returned to his room surprised to find someone there. The entire year David had lived at County House, he'd roomed alone, which was fine. It was nice after all the foster homes, most of which where he lasted only a few weeks and were filled with annoying mouth-moving children.

The boy was tiny, frail, sitting on the bed, his legs pulled into his chest, his face buried in his knees, his yellow hair a tangled mess. A pair of crutches leaned against the wall nearby, and the boy's legs were trembling, his back shaking. Cautiously, excited that maybe this boy was a hand-mover too, David approached and tapped his legs to try to get his attention.

But the boy didn't respond, and David wondered if maybe he was like the older kid at County House he called *Smashed-face*, because his nose was all messed up. He couldn't walk because he couldn't feel his legs, and White-hair-old-lady had grown particularly angry at David when he'd experimented with how far he could go before Smashed-face would feel anything.

So David had tried again, tapping the boy's shoulder this time. This made the boy look up. His face was puffy, his eyes red, his cheeks wet, and he was panting, his chest working hard, like breathing was difficult, like he'd just run around and around and around and was trying to catch his breath. But what really struck David was how incredibly blue the boy's eyes were: bluer than any he'd ever seen before, and he wondered if *Blue* was his name, since David's name was *Red* because of his hair. They'd taught him his real name was *D-A-V-I-D*, but that didn't mean anything to him.

David's eyebrows dipped, and he tapped his knuckles on his chin, thumb and pinky standing out, "*WRONG?*" Though if the boy was a mouth-mover, like most people, he probably wouldn't understand.

Instead, the boy had released his legs, and they'd fallen to the bed like discarded toys. His eyes had widened and shimmered with fresh tears before he threw his arms around David and embraced him tight.

Finally, the boy pulled back, his hands moving rapidly in the air. He was a hand-mover, too! David was so excited, he didn't even pay attention to what the boy was saying, and had to ask him to repeat himself.

The boy explained his name was *K-A-I* and that he'd lost his family, and he was particularly sad about his brother. Did David know where he was?

Family was a concept David struggled to grasp, but he knew he didn't have one, not anymore; no one at County House did. If this boy was here, his family was gone, too. "*The mouth-movers,*" David explained, using the sign they'd taught him, index finger rotating out at his mouth, which mimicked the silly way they were always wagging them, "*put you here when your family doesn't want you. Forget about them.*"

David did know what "brother" meant, on a certain level, anyway: there were twin brothers in his class, and they were best friends. "*I'm your family now. Brother.*"

David finally realized Kai was waving at him to try to get his attention. "*You OK?*"

David nodded. "*SORRY. TIRED. I still can't believe you're alive. I left Jonesville for years, and when I came back, everyone told me you'd gotten very sick, that you'd disappeared from the Community. What happened? Some kind of miracle?*"

David watched the heavy rise and fall of Kai's chest as he sighed. Then Kai shook his head. *"Transplant, both lungs. Last year."* He lifted his shirt just long enough for David to see the long scar in the center of his chest.

"WOW," David said, shaking his hand off to his side. *"I'm glad you're all right."*

Kai laughed. *"Still alive, right? What you been up to?"*

David spread his arms, gesturing around the room. *"Odd jobs. Whatever pays the bills. After I aged out of CH, I bounced around from family to family for awhile, but I couldn't deal. Dropped out. You know me. Always angry."*

Kai laughed. *"And taking it out on the world. You made it your mission to know every dirty sign there was."*

"It's one reason I learned to pick locks, so I could steal stuff to bribe the older kids to teach me. I knew the signs before I even really understood what they all meant."

Kai shook his head, still laughing. *"You always have to win at everything."*

"Hey, if they didn't call me Red, they'd probably call me Stubborn. Remember the contests we used to have? To see which of us could sign the worst possible thing and convince the staff at CH it was perfectly innocent?"

Kai had to pause to wipe tears from his eyes. *"The best one was that time you convinced that horrible orderly, Ken, you were asking for another pillow when you were really telling him his mother was a great fuck."*

They reminisced for a while, swapping stories, until finally Kai admitted, *"I missed you."*

"Don't get all sappy on me now."

"Fuck you. You cried like a baby when you thought I was dead."

David shrugged. *"So what if I did? How did you survive after CH? You didn't go into the Community, like me. How . . . ?"*

Kai took a deep breath. *"My brother. My . . . real . . . brother came for me."*

David picked up on Kai's hesitance in his signing, though David wouldn't deny how it hurt to see the signs *TRUTH* and *BROTHER* juxtaposed. *"Unlike your fake brother, who abandoned you?"* David tried to play it off as a joke, but knew he failed before he'd even finished signing. *"I'm sorry. I meant to come back, once I'd gotten some money, but I'd forgotten how much the hearing world sucked. No one would hire me, or if they did, I wouldn't last. They'd always find some reason other than my deafness, but . . ."* David shrugged. *"I ended up in Council Bluffs, at the Deaf school there. Worked as a janitor, managed to get my GED. Lived across the border so I could establish residency, got into UNO—"*

"University of Nebraska?" Kai asked in clarification.

David nodded. *"That's where I met Megan. She was doing her internship and interpreted for me a few times."*

"I can't believe my brother's ASL tutor is your fiancée. I can't believe you're engaged. And to a hearie."

David shrugged. *"My opinion of hearing people hasn't changed. But Megan's good for me. Keeps me out of trouble,"* he said with a grin. *"And you'll always have Deaf heart,"* David signed, the letter "D" handshape tapped on his heart, *"no matter what anyone says."*

Inez was on her feet before Jon had even completely emerged through the curtain. *"Gracias a Dios. I never imagined you'd be the consulting doctor they'd send us. Usually*

it's someone like that Dr. Kainer.”

Jon smiled faintly at Inez before approaching the bed. Martin was lying in it, the bed angled high so he was sitting up, a high-flow oxygen mask on his face. He was alert, though Jon could see by the rapid movement of his chest, how his shoulders rose and fell with each harsh breath, his neck muscles engaged, that even the oxygen wasn't relieving his dyspnea. A quick glance at the monitors confirmed Jon's initial assessment, but he forced a smile as he took Martin's hand and made eye contact.

“Overdid it with the trick-or-treating, huh?” Jon asked as he carefully counted Martin's breaths.

“He was with his friends when he started having a lot of trouble breathing and had to rest,” Inez explained. Jon angled his head so he could hear her, but kept his focus on Martin, who was clearly not breathing easily, his respiration rate almost double his normal. “But after a few minutes, his lips turned blue and he started shivering, so I brought him in.”

Jon nodded as he checked Martin's fingernails. Jon nibbled his lip to hide a frown; like Kai's, Martin's fingers were clubbed on the tips, and the beds were pale, faintly blue. Cyanosis. Martin, despite the oxygen, despite how hard he was working for each breath, wasn't getting enough oxygen into his blood.

“I shouldn't have let you go. It was too cold. It was too much walking.”

Martin shook his head, lifted the mask away from his face to argue. “You drove me door-to-door, Ma,” he said, his words halting and breathy. He had to pause a moment, putting the mask back in place and breathing for a few seconds before adding, “*Como un niño.*”

Jon checked the oxygen setting at the wall to ensure it matched what had been recorded in the orders. It was unlikely that bumping it up any higher than it already was would benefit Martin much, but Jon turned the flow rate up anyway.

Jon paused to record the change in the file, along with a few quick notes, but in reality, he was giving Martin some time to adjust to the higher flow. “Did you dress up? Or are you too cool for that?”

Martin laughed faintly, and Jon observed his breathing had eased slightly. “Marty McFly. *Back to the Future.*” Jon was relieved to see Martin talking a little more fluently.

Jon laughed as he noted Martin's heart rate had calmed noticeably. “Were you even alive when that came out?”

“It came out the year he was born. It's his favorite movie. He likes to tell people I was watching it when I went into labor with him, and that's why I named him Martin, but it's not true.”

Jon laughed, set the file aside and pulled out his stethoscope. “You know the drill,” he said, warming up the head before sliding it along the skin of Martin's back, carefully listening to each lobe and bronchus, occasionally encouraging Martin to take a deeper breath, hold it, then release. Jon was particularly concerned by the diffuse crackles through Martin's lungs, which sounded less like the congestion that often accompanied FS or pneumonia and more like scarring. The areas of Martin's lungs with abnormal bronchial breath sounds had spread, with a complete absence of breath sounds in the lower lobes of Martin's right lung.

“OK, say, ‘Apples are awesome,’ a few times for me,” Jon said. “You don't need to take off the mask.” Jon placed the head of the stethoscope in the areas he suspected were newly fibrosed, listening for how Martin's voice sounded. As he'd suspected, the

“E’s” had transformed to “A’s” in far more of Martin’s lungs than they had even a few weeks before. Everything suggested that the affected tissue from Martin’s last hospital stay hadn’t healed, but scarred.

“You did great,” Jon said, taking off his stethoscope and draping it around his neck, checking Martin’s fingernails again. Still pale, but less blue. “How have you been feeling lately?”

“OK,” Martin said.

“He’s been pretty good. He gets tired faster. He can’t walk as far, and he has more trouble catching his breath, but he hasn’t had as much mucus or coughing since you put him on that medicine.”

Martin had been on an immunosuppressant regimen, not quite as intense as Kai’s, but similar, which had pushed his ABPA into remission, but it sounded like the damage had been done.

Jon nodded. “I want to get a CT to confirm what the X-ray and my exam showed, and I’d like to keep you overnight, just to make sure we’re not dealing with something more serious,” Jon said, alternating glancing between Martin and his mom.

“No biopsy, right?” Martin said without lifting the mask, his words muffled.

Jon shook his head. “It shouldn’t be necessary this time.” Jon found his hand reaching up for his hair and tucked it in his pocket instead. He patted Martin’s shoulder, offering him an encouraging smile, before turning to Inez. “*Puedo hablar con usted un momentico?*”

He led Inez out of the curtained area, toward one of the actual exam rooms he knew was empty, so they’d have a place to talk outside of Martin’s earshot. Inez’s face was worried; Jon had a policy, in general, of being honest with his patients if they were old enough to understand, so he knew she was wondering what it was he felt he couldn’t say in Martin’s presence.

“*I want to wait until I get all the test results back, but I think it might be time to consider putting Martin on oxygen full time,*” Jon said in Spanish as soon as they were ensconced in the room.

Inez took in a slow, deep breath, nodding subtly.

“*I didn’t want to say anything to him yet, not until I’m certain that’s the treatment plan I’m going to give him, but I wanted to tell you first.*”

“*What does this mean for him?*”

Jon sighed, crossed his arms on his chest. “*He’s got a lot of scarring in his lungs. From years of living with FS, from previous pneumonias, and now a significant amount from this ABPA. I had hoped he would heal, but everything suggests Martin has lost a lot of functional lung tissue recently.*”

“*And that’s why he’s been having so much trouble, even though he’s not coughing or wheezing like he was before?*”

Jon nodded. “*Once the tissue is damaged, it can’t be repaired. It’s gone.*” Jon smiled faintly. “*Pero el oxígeno puede mejorar su calidad de vida.*”

Inez broke down when she heard the words “quality of life,” and Jon had to reach to help her to her seat. “*That’s what doctors say when someone’s dying.*”

Jon sighed heavily, sank down into the other seat so they were at eye level. “*I’m still fighting the transplant committee. One by one, trying to convince one of them to call a new meeting to reconsider their decision. I won’t give up on him. I promise.*”

Inez nodded, laid a hand on Jon’s arm. “*I owe you an apology. For the way I treated you the other day. You’ve done nothing but good for both of us, and you didn’t*

deserve that."

Jon shrugged. *"It's forgotten."* He smiled, gripped Inez's hands in his, looking her directly in the eyes. *"I'm going to have someone come talk to you. She'll help you deal with your insurance in getting Martin his oxygen supplies, and she'll explain how to use it. And I will talk to Martin myself if that's what we decide to do, all right?"*

Inez surprised Jon by rising and throwing her arms around him in a tight embrace. *"Que Dios le bendiga, Doctor Taylor. Gracias por todo."*

Don't thank or bless me yet, Jon thought. Take away the ABPA and replace it with pneumonia, and Martin's case looked almost identical to Kai's, four years ago. The oxygen would make Martin feel better, but he didn't have much time.

As Kai exited the school, he immediately noticed the temperature had dropped a few more degrees, and a light, cold drizzle had begun to fall. Kai paused to zip his coat up further, but he still shivered. He'd get to his car as fast as he could, get home, and sleep forever. Still, it had been surprisingly nice to see David again, and to chat with some of the other Deafies who were none the wiser about who he was or his history, which was fine. It would come out eventually, but for one night he could just enjoy being surrounded by the language and culture he loved and missed desperately.

A few cars had left, making Kai's path through the paved portion of the parking lot more direct and faster, to his relief, but as he carefully wheelied through the unpaved lot, nearing his car, he let out a string of English curses. An asshole in a large pickup (complete with cattle guard) had parked illegally on the driver's side of Kai's car, leaving him blocked in on both sides. He pushed around, but it was no use. It'd be hard enough for an able-bodied person to squeeze in; there was no way his chair would fit. Kai shivered as some rain snuck down the back of his neck between the collar of his jacket. It was a long way back to the school, and since it was still early, relatively, it wasn't likely anyone else was going to come along in the immediate future.

"Fuck!" Kai screamed, slamming his hand on the hood of the truck.

He rubbed his fist, glaring at the car, as if the power of his stare could move it, when an idea occurred to him. He pushed away, studying the situation. He could potentially use the proximity of the truck to his advantage. He snorted at the thought. At least as much of an "advantage" as he could in this predicament. He wasn't wearing his braces, but if he could get his left leg to cooperate enough not to buckle, he could potentially leave his chair in front of the truck, using the hood for leverage, then the body to support his own while he gripped the luggage rack on the roof of his car to help pull himself along. It wouldn't be fast or easy, and it was a risk: if he slipped or fell or moved wrong, he could legitimately fuck up his right leg, which was nearly healed, and he hadn't worn his knee brace.

Kai turned his head to gaze out at the dark parking lot toward the lights of the school. His only options were to go back, find someone—David maybe—to pull his car out enough for him to get in since it was too cold to wait out here, or attempt his acrobatic feat and hope for the best. A shiver tore through Kai's body again.

"No guts, no glory, right?" he said out loud, positioning himself as close as possible to the gap between the two cars while still ensuring he wouldn't hit his chair once he pulled out of the space. He stared hard for a few more minutes, calculating, then lifted his feet off the foot rest, one by one, testing his left leg. "What the fuck am I thinking?"

Double-checking the brakes on his wheels (and that he had his car keys in his

pocket), Kai reached out for the top bar of the cattle guard, using it to pull himself to his feet, trying his best not to bump his right leg or lean on it too heavily, praying his left leg would hold. His knee wobbled and tried to buckle, so he pulled himself tighter to the grill of the truck, using the bumper to help support him, taking a few seconds to catch his breath. Then he reached for the side mirror, grateful for his long arms, managing to pull himself along the side of the pickup, half hopping and half dragging his left leg, gripping tightly to the truck, praying he wouldn't fall. Hesitantly, he released his grip on the truck's mirror, reaching out for his car, holding his breath as he felt himself start to slide. The rain wasn't helping, making every surface slick. Kai hurriedly shifted his right arm to the truck's mirror, then his left to the bar on the roof rack of his car.

His body wobbled, and for a moment, he sank down, his knees beginning to give out, leaving him half-hanging between the mirror of the truck and the rack of his car. Thankfully, because of the narrow space, he was able to angle his hip, leaning into the side of his car, which gave him the chance to adjust his hold on the bar of the luggage rack and pull himself up. Leaning against the edge of the driver's side door, he moved his other arm to the rack, bowing his head and breathing heavily. The rain was coming down harder now, but he was overheated from the effort, his skin that strange mix of hot yet chilled you only get from exertion in cold weather. But he was almost there, and though his left knee was screaming at him, his right seemed to be OK.

He used his grip on the luggage bar to pull, slide, and hop his way a half foot down the side of his car, which would give him room enough to unlock it and open the door. Kai adjusted his hold, leaning on the roof of the car so that his left forearm was braced against the bar, his hand gripping one of the supports tightly. Once he was sure he was as secure as he could be in the situation, he released his left hand, pulling out his keys carefully, making sure he had a firm grip. If he dropped them now, he'd be fucked.

Thankfully, he was able to get the car unlocked on the first try without slipping down, though getting the door open from this angle was a little trickier. He managed to pull the handle, inching the door open. Shoving his keys back in his pocket, Kai then was able to get his hand on the edge and pry it open as far as he could in the confined space. One hand on the top of the door, the other slid to the top edge of the luggage rack, Kai was able to twist just enough to awkwardly drop into the seat, his legs a little tangled. He paused for a moment, shivering, his cheeks hot but burning with chill, his hair plastered to his face from the rain and sweat, regaining his breath. At least his new lungs didn't react to the cold air the way his old ones would have, he thought, relieved. Finally, he pulled his legs in, massaging his left knee—he'd have to ice it before bed—relieved his right seemed to be OK, and hurriedly turning the engine and blasting the heat.

Now that he was no longer grappling, his body decided shivering would be an excellent course of action, his teeth chattering. Kai was tempted to sit for a moment in the enclosed car, letting it warm up, but his chair was standing out in the cold rain, and he needed to get home. Once he was sure his hands had stopped shaking enough to trust them, Kai carefully eased the car forward, watching for his wheelchair. Once he had pulled past it safely, he opened his door, and gripping the steering wheel with his right hand, leaned over and yanked his chair closer, since the wheels were locked. He popped them off, tossing them one by one, then the frame, in the passenger's seat.

He was exhausted, his shoulders and arms burning with fatigue, soaked and cold, but he'd done it. He tried not to think of the irony that if he'd invited Renee along, she could have easily squeezed through and pulled the car forward in less than five minutes instead of the nearly half-hour ordeal it had taken him.

As Kai headed home, he decided there was a lesson in there somewhere, but he was too tired to give it much thought.

November 2, 2000

Kai sat in his wheelchair, leaned back, reading through the study guide Renee had come up with for their midterm. It was only a few days away, and already Kai was worried. He'd done well on his makeup work, but failed his last exam, and it was going to take an intervention ala Jeanne d'Arc to get him through the class with the D he'd need to move on to the second semester. But the surgical mask was uncomfortable, distracting. He looked up. The waiting room was full since Tuesdays and Thursdays were always the busiest clinic days. He'd be putting himself at a huge risk if he didn't keep it on. He sighed. Just another of the little inconveniences of his life post-transplant. But he supposed being able to breathe was worth the exchange.

He happened to glance up just as two more people came in the door. A short Hispanic woman in her 40s with a frail-looking teenage boy of about fourteen also wearing a surgical mask, pulling an oxygen canister behind him. Looking at him was like staring into Kai's own past, and he beckoned them over. The boy smiled, glanced up at his mom for permission, then hurried over.

A smile lit his eyes as he sank down into the empty seat beside Kai's chair, even though he was breathing hard, still not used to the oxygen, apparently. "You're Kai, aren't you?"

Kai nodded. "I know it's instinctive to breathe through your mouth when you're out of breath, but try to close your mouth and breathe through your nose instead. You'll recover faster with the oxygen."

The kid obeyed, and soon his breathing had eased subtly, and he relaxed again, though he still seemed elated to meet Kai. "I'm Martin."

"Nice to meet you, Martin." Kai offered his hand and they shook, only to have Martin's mother rush over and immediately chastise him, commanding him to stick out his hand for her to squirt antibacterial gel into it.

"You remember what Dr. Taylor said. You have to be careful about getting sick."

So the boy was immunocompromised, too. This could be the patient Jon had been stressing about before, when Kai had his severe MLS attack. The kid looked embarrassed; obviously, he saw Kai as some kind of hero—he wasn't the first kid with FS who'd seen Kai that way—and now his mother had burst in and made him look bad in front of Kai.

"She's right, Martin," Kai said. "You have to be very careful. Things that wouldn't make your mom sick can make us very sick."

His mother was pulled away from her worry for a moment, seeming to see Kai for the first time. "Oh, you have to be Dr. Taylor's brother. It's nice to meet you. We've heard a lot about you."

Kai offered his hand, and she hesitated initially, but finally accepted it. Afterward, she offered him some of the antibacterial gel. He didn't want to tell her it was pointless for him to use it right now, since he'd have to touch his wheels to get to the exam room, but he accepted nonetheless, smiling despite the mask.

"I'm Inez, and I suppose you met Martin already."

Before Kai could say anything, Martin interrupted. "Did it hurt?"

Kai blinked, before finally connecting the dots: Martin was asking about Kai's transplant. "Yes. But—" Kai was about to add that no amount of pain post-transplant

could have been as bad as the suffering he'd been in before, but it was obvious Martin hadn't been on oxygen therapy very long; he was on the downslope, but at the peak still looking down. Maybe it was better if he didn't see what lay ahead of him. Hope and optimism were just as important as any other medicine. "But not for long," Kai said instead.

"Can I see?"

"Martin," Inez scolded. "Leave him alone." She looked at Kai. "I'm sorry he's bothering you. But your story means a lot to him. To all the FS patients."

Kai nodded. He knew he did; he also knew it was possible the transplant wasn't the cure they'd been hoping for, but no one except Dr. J and Kai knew that, and Kai planned to keep it that way as long as possible. "It's all right. I'm used to people asking me questions." Kai made sure his study guide was secured between his legs, then used his hands to shift his body in the seat subtly, so he was angled a little more toward Martin. "You want to see my scars?"

Kai could tell Martin was beaming even through the mask.

"OK, but it'll be really quick." Kai hurriedly lifted his shirt and fleece pullover, just long enough for Martin to get a quick peek before letting the fabric cover him again.

"Whoa."

Kai laughed.

"What's it like? Not having trouble breathing all the time?"

Kai found it difficult to meet Martin's eyes. Kai knew the transplant committee had closed off FS patients from being listed—Jon ranted about it all the time, and he'd been working on trying to change their minds. But even if Martin could be listed, he could wait years and possibly die before a match came up; Kai had waited more than two years himself. And then, even if he matched, he had to survive the surgery and the immediate aftermath, the first few months, the first year.

But Kai didn't want to lie to him, either. "It's awesome," Kai admitted finally, smiling. "Weird, at first. It's still . . . weird, sometimes. But generally, it's awesome."

Martin stared at Kai dreamily, as if he were trying to imagine what life without a constant struggle for air was like. Kai knew he'd tried more than once, before, when he was younger, and his dreams hadn't compared to reality.

"Kai?"

Kai turned his head to see the nurse, holding his chart, beckoning him in. "I have to go," Kai said, adjusting his body in his chair. "It was nice meeting you both. I hope you feel better," Kai said, winking at Martin. "If you ever need to talk to someone who's been through it all, just tell Dr. Taylor. I'm happy to do it."

"Thank you," Inez said.

Kai already had his vitals taken, so he'd pulled himself onto the exam table, and sat, bracing himself with his hands on each side of his thighs. His left leg was spasming, making his heel hit against the cabinet of the table over and over and over. It didn't hurt, but the sound was irritating, making it hard for him to try to run over the dates in his mind as he struggled to study. He kept losing his focus, forgetting his thoughts almost as soon as they hit him.

It didn't help that his mind kept turning to Martin. What did passing history matter when there was a good chance Martin would die? Jon hadn't said it, but Kai wasn't an idiot. The transplant committee had taken a chance with Kai, and they were watching him carefully before they allowed anyone else with FS to be listed. It was a very

Jon-like thought, but was it that far off to realize that if Martin, if any other FS patient who might be saved by a transplant died, it would be essentially Kai's fault?

Kai drummed his fingers on the edge of the table, feeling his anxiety blooming in their tingle. No. He had to get his mind out of the crazy loop before it went too far. He tried to multiply by threes in his head. *Three times three is nine. Nine times three is twenty-seven. Twenty-seven times three. . .* But he couldn't even focus on that; once he got into triple digits, while he tried to do the math in his head, he'd forget what he was multiplying. The more he tried to concentrate, the more frustrated he became. *Threes. Multiplication of threes.* But he couldn't remember where he was. He tried to start over.

Three times three is nine. Nine times three is twenty-seven. Twenty . . . twenty. Twenty. . . Kai slammed his hand on the exam bench in frustration as his breathing increased and his hands began to shake.

Kai struggled to calm his breathing, to not give in to the anxiety, but it was beyond his control. He was gasping, his eyes shut, his body shaking and spasming, his mind racing along with his heart like a movie on fast forward.

"Kai," a voice vaguely pierced the veil of panic. "Kai, it's OK."

The voice was nearly drowned out by the thud of his legs against the table, the pounding of blood in his ears, the harsh wheeze that filled every desperate breath.

He felt a mask being secured to his face, then the cold, slightly bitter familiarity of nebulized albuterol. Two hands rested reassuringly on his shoulders. The touch and the meds helped stop the panic; though his breath still came harshly and his heart still beat as if trying to flee his chest, his spasms and shaking calmed some. He opened his eyes, trying to take deep breaths, his body resisting the effort.

Jon. Kai had expected Dr. J, or a nurse. "Try to relax and breathe, Kai," Jon said. "Where's your anxiety meds?"

Kai pointed to his chair, though his arm trembled, and he soon dropped it. "Pocket. Small. Bag." Kai pushed himself back just enough to rest his head against the wall. As the anxiety began to drain away, so did Kai's energy, leaving him exhausted, feeling used up like he did after a particularly intense workout.

He let his eyes drift closed, focusing on his breathing, which had calmed, though it was still more labored than normal.

He stayed like that a few minutes, until he felt Jon's hand smooth his, then lift the mask away.

"Here," Jon said, offering Kai a pill. "You're OK."

Kai took the pill with some tap water Jon gave him, but otherwise barely moved. "Jon."

"I had just finished up with a patient next door and heard someone in here who sounded like they were struggling."

"I haven't had . . . a full panic attack . . . in weeks."

"I told you not to stress so much about school." Jon waved Kai's study guide, which had floated to the floor during the anxiety attack.

Before either of them could say anything else, there was a knock on the door, and Dr. Johnsen came in. "Kai? Are you all right?"

Kai nodded.

"*Don't leave without talking to me, OK?*" Jon signed, looking at Kai with brotherly concern.

Kai managed a nod, his eyes tracking Jon as he left.

Dr. J took Kai's wrist, frowned as he felt Kai's pulse. "What happened?"

Kai sighed. Losing control of himself like that was bad enough when he was alone, but so much worse in public. At least it had happened in the relative privacy of the exam room instead of the waiting room, in front of dozens of people. In front of Martin and his mother. "Panic attack."

Dr. J had slipped a pulse oximeter on Kai's finger and was observing him closely. "Dr. Miller been working out for you?"

Kai nodded.

Dr. J removed the oximeter and helped Kai sit up. "You have anxiety attacks often?"

"Not lately. I can usually stop them before they get out of control. But I've been really stressed out."

"Because of school?" Dr. J felt Kai's neck and under his jaw for swollen lymph nodes. "I thought you told me you were dropping a couple classes?"

"I did. But I'm failing history. It's so hard for me to remember things."

Dr. J pulled out his stethoscope. "You've spoken to your professor, though, and you have a tutor, right?"

"Yeah, and I get extra time during exams, but if I bomb the midterm, it'll be almost impossible for me to pass the class."

"I'm sure you'll be fine, Kai." Dr. J pressed the head of the stethoscope between his hands to warm it up. "I'm pretty sure you can do anything you set your mind to." Kai rolled his eyes, but if Dr. J noticed, he said nothing. "Slow, deep breaths for me."

Dr. J listened to Kai's lungs carefully for several minutes, moving the stethoscope around Kai's back, asking Kai to hold his breath or breathe normally, finally switching to his chest to listen to his heart before slipping the buds out of his ears and draping the stethoscope around his neck.

"Jon gave you some albuterol just now?"

Kai nodded.

"It help? When you have trouble breathing from the anxiety?"

Kai nodded again.

Dr. J sank down into the chair at the desk, scribbling some notes. "And other than that, how has your breathing been?"

"Good."

"You been making sure to cough twice a day?"

"Yeah."

"Does it seem like you've been coughing up a lot?"

Kai shrugged. "I guess a little more than normal."

"Anything nasty?"

"Not really. It's all in my book," Kai said, pointing. He was exhausted. Maybe he'd lie down in Jon's office for a while before going home.

Dr. J took a moment to read through Kai's notebook, where he tracked his oxygen saturation, his peak flow, his temperature, and notes about how he was feeling, including anything that stood out.

After a while, the doctor looked up at Kai. "Even with the albuterol, I heard some congestion. Your temperature is normal, and you've been feeling fine?"

Kai nodded, but he felt a bit of his anxiety returning.

"It's all right," Dr. J said, as if sensing Kai's tension. "I'm going to send in a nurse to take some blood and try to get a sputum sample, then do a quick chest x-ray. I'll call you if any of the results point to rejection or infection, but call me first if you develop

a fever, start feeling sick, or start coughing outside your routine. Keep an eye on how much and what color your sputum is, and let me know if it changes. OK?”

Kai nodded.

“And you should really wear your medical alert jewelry, Kai. I know it reminds you of before, but paramedics need to know you’re immunocompromised. And that way they’ll have my number if you get brought in again. All right?”

Again, Kai nodded reluctantly.

“And wear your mask in class. I know it’s not cool, but it could save your life, OK?”

Jon entered his office as quietly as he could, slipping out of his white coat and hanging it on the hook on the back of his door. Kai was stretched out on Jon’s couch, asleep, his feet twitching, but otherwise looking peaceful. Jon crossed to his desk to check his blood sugar, though he kept an eye on his brother. As the time stretched, Jon finally settling in to get some work done, Kai began to grow more restless in his sleep, his spasms more powerful, moaning subtly. Perhaps he was having a nightmare.

Jon abandoned his desk and approached the couch, hesitating before sitting in Kai’s wheelchair. Jon held out his hands but didn’t touch Kai, since doing so sometimes made his brother’s panic worse when he finally woke.

“Kai, it’s all right. You’re safe. Wake up.” It took Jon several minutes before Kai finally woke suddenly, his eyes springing open, breathing hard, obviously uncertain of where he was. “You’re in my office. You’re OK.”

Kai leaned back, dropping his head, giving his body a chance to calm down. After a few minutes, he laid a hand on his right thigh. “Did I spasm much in my sleep?”

“Not too bad. How you feeling?”

“Honestly?” Kai said, pushing himself up with a grunt. “Exhausted. But I’m supposed to drop by Lost Apple to study with Renee.”

“If you want my professional opinion, you should go home, take some Valium, and sleep. If you push yourself too hard, you’re only going to make it worse. You won’t do well on the test if you’re spasming and tired and anxious.”

Instead of heading to Lost Apple, Kai had detoured back to his apartment, debating giving in to Jon’s advice and taking a long, drug-assisted nap. Ever since Halloween, he’d been exhausted, achy, and if he were honest with himself, not feeling his best. It was likely stress over the midterm: his muscle spasms had spiked over the past few days, as had his anxiety and nightmares. These usually involved him showing up late for the test, or the questions being written in some unintelligible script. Pretty typical stuff, but the fear and panic they filled him with were almost as intense as the dreams that had sent him to Dr. Miller in the first place.

Kai pushed into his bedroom, to his dresser. Even though he’d napped in Jon’s office, his body was begging for rest. If Kai had learned anything over the past two months, it was that his body didn’t like to be pushed too hard. That he had to listen to it.

Kai pulled one drawer open far enough he could reach in and fish out a small box that rattled as he took it out. Shutting the drawer again, Kai removed the box’s lid and examined the contents, stainless steel glinting in the light. His medical ID jewelry. He extracted a small bracelet from the jumble, laying it on one hand. The links had been cut, so it no longer was a complete circle, but Kai joined the ends by holding them, marveling at how it barely encircled three fingers. Had he really been that tiny once?

Kai had been wearing that bracelet when his parents died, and he'd worn it until he'd grown out of it and it Ms. Evans forcibly cut it off. Kai had begged to keep it, but she'd refused. The only physical remnant of his old life, its loss had been devastating, and Kai had withdrawn within himself, refusing to eat or leave his room for days. Ms. Evans had begun some serious threats—including a dreaded nasogastric feeding tube—when David woke Kai up in the middle of the night and pressed something into Kai's hand. David, knowing how much it meant to Kai, had broken into room after room until he'd found it in Ms. Evans's desk.

The engraving was worn away, because Kai had rubbed his fingers along it frequently over the years, using it as a kind of talisman. He studied it now, and he could just barely make out his name, as it used to be: *Joseph K. Taylor*. It felt like a stranger.

With a sigh, Kai set it aside, removing another bracelet from the box. This one was newer, larger. What he'd worn before his transplant, a gift from Becca. A painful reminder of her, and before, but he'd never managed to get rid of it or pack it away. He extracted a third bracelet, this one very different from the others, with a leather band and a decorative plate. New. A "you survived" gift from Jon, a belated birthday present to celebrate Kai surviving his first month post-transplant. But Kai had resisted wearing it; his scars he could never take off, but this he could.

One item remained in the box: his first-transplant-anniversary gift, also from Jon. A set of dog tags, the caduceus signaling what they were, each fully engraved with his current info and contact numbers. "*If you won't wear the bracelet, at least wear these,*" Jon had insisted. Kai sighed, pulled the chain over his head, staring at his image a long while in the mirror. Maybe he was being immature. Irresponsible. After all, Jon wore a bracelet so that if anything happened to him, paramedics would know he was insulin-dependent.

Kai palmed the tags, still studying his face in the mirror. He'd text David, see if he was available to help Kai study. Maybe if someone quizzed him in sign and he answered back in kind, the material would stick better. And as comfortable as Renee could make him feel, he still couldn't fully relax around her, not yet. With David, even though it had been so long, he didn't have to pretend.

Not long after sending David his initial message, his phone buzzed. *Morning work fish. Now you need what?* (Which meant, in English, non-text-speak, "I only had work in the morning. What do you need?")

Stdy u hlp me? My apt?

Fine. Txt me your live where.

Kai smiled. It was kind of freeing not to have to think in pure English, even when he was texting. He hurriedly texted his address and then called Renee to explain he was going to try to study with his friend in ASL and that he'd see her in the morning.

About half an hour later, Kai heard unrelenting pounding on the front door, and rushed to answer. David stood outside, a shit-eating grin on his face.

"Some people could hear that, you know. This is why you were always getting in trouble at CH."

David just grinned wider and squeezed around Kai to enter the apartment, slipping out of his coat and tossing it on the nearest surface.

Kai sighed, shaking his head. Looked like David hadn't changed.

David whirled around so Kai could see him. "*Nice apartment.*"

Kai shrugged. "*It's my brother's; I just live here.*"

David rolled his eyes, then bent down for a quick hug. When he stood back up, he frowned. *"You're super stressed. You look like shit."*

Kai just shrugged, a "yeah, no shit, that's why you're here," expression on his face, but David had already beelined for the kitchen; he'd always had a voracious appetite, especially as a teenager, and his last two years at CH, he ate his own meal plus most of Kai's, since the Mexitil made Kai too nauseous to manage much.

Not surprisingly, David was digging around the fridge and cabinets looking for sustenance. He finally turned around, frustrated. He drew his hand down intensely from neck to stomach. *"I'm starving. Don't you have anything to eat around here?"*

"I can cook something really quick, but it'd be vegetarian."

David gaped at Kai, repeated the sign for *VEGETABLE*, then *ONLY* to make sure he'd understood, his eyebrows raised. *"Vegetarian?!"*

Kai laughed. *"I don't eat meat anymore because of my MLS. Jon doesn't either, not at home."*

"You're killing me," David signed melodramatically, acting out slowly starving to death after eating only a series of vegetables like carrots and celery.

Kai shook his head, rolled backward to the drawer where he kept the takeout menus, pulled out a stack, and offered them to him, signing one-handed. *"Then order something."*

David accepted the menus, but stared at Kai, his eyebrows raised. *"You've been in the hearing world too long."*

Kai seemed to realize his faux faux and sighed. *"Pick out what you want, and I'll call. My treat."*

A few minutes later, David sat across from Kai at the table, eating a bowl of cereal to tide himself over, watching his friend place their food order. It was strange, seeing Kai's lips move; at County House, David could forget Kai was hearing most of the time, especially since Kai never spoke unless forced to the last time David had seen him.

David could read Kai's lips if he wanted, since he knew, more or less, what Kai had to be saying, but there was no point, so he flipped through Kai's history book instead. Kai had post-its everywhere, notes scribbled in Kai's slanting writing. Mostly mnemonics, key people and dates.

Glancing up, David could see how tired and stressed Kai was. It was strange; Kai had never worried much about school before.

"I still think it's insane you asked me to help you study." David lifted his hand, palm flat, up, to indicate *growing up*, then pointed to Kai, then repeatedly signed "A" against his left palm, which suggested the grade, saying, *"You always got all A's. Me?"* He pointed to himself. *"FAIL. FAIL. FAIL."* His right hand, palm up, index and middle fingers up, sliding down and off his palm-up left hand repeatedly.

Kai laughed. *"Because you were too busy FLIRT FLIRT FLIRTing with all the girls. Or causing trouble for the teachers."*

David shoved some cereal in his mouth, signing single-handedly, *"I had a reputation. Besides, you were always smarter than me. I owe you for helping me improve my English."*

"You got your GED, got into college, and graduated. Not many kids from the system manage that. I can't even pass two classes."

Kai's frustration radiated off him almost like a visible aura, making David frown. They could start studying once the food came. Taking a few more bites of cereal,

David decided a change in subject might do Kai good.

“What are your Thanksgiving plans?”

David observed Kai’s left index finger tapped his thumb rapidly over and over and over, as if trying to release some of his anxiety, and his eyes were unfocused, as if his mind was elsewhere.

David waved his hand to try to get Kai’s attention, but that didn’t work, so he tried tapping on the table. Kai’s breathing had shifted, his chest moving more visibly and harshly, lost in himself. Finally, David clapped near Kai’s face.

That finally made Kai jump, struggle to calm himself, slow, deep breaths. David offered his hand, saying nothing, and Kai accepted. Kai never complained, because that’s who Kai was, but ever since he’d returned to County House after his brief stint with the woman claiming to be his aunt, Kai hadn’t been the same. Apparently, their years apart hadn’t changed Kai’s occasional bouts with anxiety.

Without letting go of Kai’s hand, David continued with his other, *“You’re stressed because your ‘study partner’ is your girlfriend. I bet your ‘studying sessions’ looked like this,”* David said as he pretended to make out with himself.

Kai managed a laugh and David could feel Kai’s grip on his hand relaxing a little. *“She’s amazing,”* Kai signed, taking his hand back. *“I can’t wait for you to meet her.”*

“If she falls in love with me instead, don’t blame me. It’s hard for a woman to resist this,” David signed with a huge, silly grin, indicating himself.

Kai laughed longer now, some of the tension going out of his shoulders, to David’s relief.

“Really. What are you doing for the holiday?”

David watched Kai’s chest expand as he took a deep breath. *“Jon’s girlfriend wants me to join them at her family’s, but . . . that’s just weird. But Jon won’t go without me . . .”* Kai shrugged, reached for his book, but David planted his arms firmly on it until Kai gave up, glaring at him.

“Come to my house.”

“You sure? I don’t want to be a third wheel.”

David gaped at Kai. *“Kai,”* he said, using his personal name sign for Kai, a modification of the sign for *brother*. *“You’re my brother,”* David said, pointing to his forehead before finishing the sign, a “duh” look on his face. *“Besides, Megan has a thing for strays, so you won’t be the only one there besides us.”* David indicated Megan’s affinity for those without families to spend the holiday with by first signing *MY HOUSE*, then using a classifier for a “person” (the handshape for “D,” index finger standing up) with his left hand, moving it around in front of him in a semicircle, while he used his right hand to “pluck” them in the sign for *pick/find* toward the space where he’d drawn his house earlier, as if she were literally plucking strays up and putting them in their house.

This made Kai chuckle faintly. *“All right. I’ll tell Jon he can go to his girlfriend’s family, then. She’ll be elated.”* He frowned. *“Will I be able to fit in your house?”* He tapped his wheels.

David’s face shifted. *“You really can’t walk anymore?”*

Kai sighed heavily. *“About two months ago, I had a really, really bad MLS attack, and I hurt my legs pretty badly. I have an appointment in two weeks with my doctor, but I won’t know if I can walk outside PT until then. Even if he clears me, I might prefer the chair anyway if there’s ice or snow. Plus, it makes signing easier,”* Kai

finished with a faint smile.

David considered this for a moment. There was a single step leading up to the front entrance, but he wasn't sure about the door widths. He'd have to ask Kai or measure. His house was a single story, at least. But Kai would never fit in the guest bathroom, though with a few minor changes, he'd be fine in the master bath. *"I'll make it work. I promise."*

Kai's head jerked up suddenly, looking over David's shoulder. *"The food's here."* He started to reach for the money he set out, but David waved him off, signaling he'd get it.

David jogged to the door, pulling it open. A typical delivery guy stood there, bundled up against the cold, holding an insulated case with their food.

The guy began to talk, and David caught "Sorry" and "Your order" before the man dipped his head, making it impossible for David to keep reading his lips. Damn hearies. Was it really so hard to maintain eye contact?

David tried to get the guy's attention, but failed, so he finally whacked his hand on the top of the case, making the guy jump. David had to force his smile away. He pointed to his ear and shook his head, mouthing, *Deaf.*

The guy's eyes and mouth widened, and David caught more apologies and the rest was too mumbled—the man's lips not moving enough for him to catch what he said—as he accepted the money and quickly handed over the food.

David sighed, kicking the door shut behind him as he brought the food to the kitchen. Once his hands were free, he asked Kai, *"Did you hear anything the guy said?"*

Kai shook his head. *"All I could hear is the wind. Is it really nasty out there?"*

David nodded. *"Smells like snow, but I don't think it's in the forecast till this weekend. Let's eat, then we'll find out how little I remember of world history."*

A few hours later and David had managed to devour nearly all of the massive quantity of food he'd ordered, and Kai was feeling a bit better about the test.

"How are you not still skinny?" David asked, holding up the pinky finger of his left hand while he slid his thumb and index of his right up it, his lips pursed to emphasize extremely thin. *"Your appetite hasn't improved much."*

Kai shrugged. *"I know exactly how many calories I need to eat, and I make sure I get those, but unless it's sweet, I look at food like my meds. I need it, but I don't like taking it."*

David drew his hand, three central fingers standing up in the "W" handshape, slightly bent, across his face. *"Weirdo. Anyway, I don't know what you're talking about with your memory. It seems fine, and you know the material pretty well."*

Kai shrugged. *"That's one reason I invited you over. It's more of a problem for me in English,"* Kai's right hand slapped hard on his left wrist as he signed "English." *"Maybe after all these years my brain still has to work harder to process it or something."*

"English sucks, but it's a fact of life. So. Tell me about this girl of yours. Renee?"

Kai sighed. *"She's amazing. Beautiful, patient, smart, and crazy about me, which probably makes her insane."*

David laughed. *"Hearing?"*

Kai nodded. *"But she wants to learn to sign. For me."*

"Nice."

Kai heard the front door unlocking, and a moment later, Jon emerged, rubbing his hand over his hair. “Brr. It’s really coming down out there. Might be ice in the morning.”

Kai interpreted for David’s sake, then sim-commed, “*You’re home early.*”

“Just for a few hours.” Jon stripped off his wet coat and made his way into the apartment. “Oh. The transplant committee finally caved and notified me today they’ll reconvene, perhaps next week. They haven’t set a date yet.” Jon finally noticed David. He took a reflexive step back in surprise when David shifted so he could see Jon too.

“*Jon, this is my friend David,*” Kai said, fingerspelling David’s name and then giving his standard name sign, *Red*. “*We grew up together.*” Kai hesitated, then added, “*He was my CH roommate.*”

“Oh,” Jon said, nodding, surprised. “*Nice to meet you.*”

“*My fiancée is your tutor.*”

Kai observed his brother watching David’s signs with intense concentration, obviously used to signing only with Kai and Megan. He mimicked the sign for “fiancée,” asking what that meant.

David patiently fingerspelled the word, slowing down for Jon’s sake.

“Oh! *Megan,*” Jon said, getting it now, signing Megan’s name sign, a variation of *sunshine*.

David nodded, smiling. “*It was nice meeting you, but I should go before the weather gets worse. Text me later,*” David said to Kai before leaning down for a hug. “*Thanks for the food. I’ll let myself out.*” David waved to them both, shook Jon’s hand, then headed for the door.

Jon sank down across from Kai after locking the door behind David. “*How are you feeling?*”

Honestly, Kai’s chest felt a little tight, but it was time for him to cough and take his meds, so that was probably it. But his anxiety had faded somewhat. It had been nice, hanging out with David, picking up almost as if six years hadn’t passed. “*Better. I think I’m going to do my routine, take some Valium, and go to sleep early. David ate most of it, but there might be some food left if you haven’t eaten.*”

“*Good. I worry about you, you know.*”

Kai smiled faintly. “*I know. David invited me to spend Thanksgiving with him and Megan. It’s Deafie stray dinner, apparently, so you can go to Vicky’s guilt-free.*”

Jon groaned, slipping back into English. “I was kind of hoping you’d go. She has seven brothers and sisters, Kai. And they’re all married with kids. Maybe it’s too soon for me to throw myself in the viper pit. I mean, we’ve only been dating technically a couple months.”

“But you’ve been in love with each other for years. If it gets bad, sneak me a text and I’ll call you. You can feign a hospital emergency. You are on call, aren’t you?”

Jon grinned. “Thanks. Get some sleep. I’ll be up a while if you need anything, working on my presentation for the committee before heading back to the hospital.”

Kai had started to wheel away but paused, made a slow turn. “I met Martin in the waiting room today. I hope you can change their minds. He seems like a sweet kid.”

Jon sighed heavily. “He is.”

Kai had coughed himself for several minutes, and he still didn’t feel right. What he’d managed to cough up was clear, but extremely thick, big plugs of mucus like he hadn’t had since before his transplant, and it worried him. Especially since he couldn’t so much

feel as sense he had more congestion that wouldn't come up. And though his peak flow numbers were decent, his PO2 was slightly lower than normal. Nothing alarming, but enough that, in context, it was concerning.

Kai sat in his bathroom for several minutes, staring at his little notebook, trying to decide what to do. His temperature was normal, but he definitely didn't *feel* normal. He could try some albuterol and hope that would open him up more for a second coughing. He could ask Jon to pound his back and see if that would help loosen anything up. But of course, telling Jon that anything *might* be wrong would open a whole mess of worry that Kai really didn't want to invite.

Kai closed his eyes and listened to his body, focusing on what he could hear and feel. A subtle, quiet wheeze with every exhalation, a vague heaviness in his chest he couldn't localize, and a dizzy exhaustion, like the very air in the room were weighing him down.

Finally, he opened his eyes again, staring at his image in the mirror briefly. He looked as pale and tired as he felt. He'd try plan A, along with plenty of sleep, and hope it was just the stress of his midterm getting to him.

November 3, 2000

Kai's eyes opened blearily. He was vaguely aware that his alarm was blaring, and he suspected it had been sounding for some time, yet he couldn't find the energy to reach over and shut it off. There was no way it could be morning already. He felt weighed down, worn out as if he hadn't slept at all. Disconcertingly the way he felt after an attack. To make things worse, breathing took more effort than it should.

Kai must have drifted back into sleep, because he woke with a jolt, surprised to find Jon sitting on the edge of his bed, looking worried. Kai's alarm had been silenced, and Jon had his hand pressed against Kai's forehead.

"Your alarm had been going off for thirty minutes, so I came in to check on you. You don't look good."

"I'm fine," Kai insisted, pushing himself up. "Just tired."

Jon looked at Kai, clearly not buying it. He handed Kai the thermometer. "Take your temperature, at least."

Kai snatched the thermometer from his brother and shoved it in his mouth, holding it expertly under his tongue as he used his hands to shift his body, sitting up straighter.

"Let me listen to your lungs," Jon asked as he reached up to help keep the thermometer in place. Kai glared at him, but Jon ignored him.

Kai adjusted his weight, supporting himself with one hand, freeing up his other to sign, "*No. I saw Dr. J yesterday. I'm fine.*" The thermometer beeped, and Jon immediately checked it, seeming surprised by its reading.

"Normal."

"See. Fine. Now, if you don't mind, I have a midterm later today, so . . ." Kai made a shooing gesture.

Jon frowned. "All right. Good luck on your test. Dress warmly. And cover your mouth. I'm working late tonight, but call me if you need to."

An hour later, Kai had taken his meds, showered, and coughed, and though he felt a little better, he'd gotten even more gunk out than the night before. And like the night before, he sensed a heaviness suggesting more lurked in the depths of his lungs. Worse, what he managed to cough up was thick and incredibly sticky.

Kai hesitated, then pulled up Dr. J's number on his phone and dialed. He'd expected to leave a message, but at the last moment, the doctor answered.

"Dr. Johnsen."

"It's Kai."

"Kai? I don't have all your results yet. You feeling OK?"

Kai took in a breath, which hitched. Then he explained his concerns, hoping he was just paranoid.

When he finished, Dr. J was silent a long while. "And your PO₂ has been down?"

Kai sighed. "Yeah, a few points."

"I'm going to call down a script for amphigarol. I want you to start taking it again. It's worth a try."

"So I'm not being paranoid. It's started already. I'm going to get sick again."

“We don’t know that, Kai. I’m just being cautious. Come see me after you’ve been taking the amphigazol for a couple weeks, unless anything changes before then. Nebulize twice a day with the albuterol to help you clear the mucus if you need to.”

That afternoon, Renee was waiting for Kai with a steaming to-go cup when he finally emerged from the study room where he took his tests. She was smiling at him, looking beautiful as always, even though she wore a baggy sweatshirt, her face makeup-free, and her hair pulled back into a frizzy ponytail.

He knew he had to look tired, because he was exhausted, and despite Dr. J’s assurances, felt about as good as he had when he’d woken up that morning. It didn’t help that his legs had spasmed all through the test, his anxiety just below the surface, barely kept in check by the hydroxyzine and sheer will.

But Renee rushed up and kissed him quickly and sweetly, offering him the drink. “Hot milk with lots of sugar. I heard through the grapevine it was your favorite.”

Kai accepted the drink with a sweet, grateful smile, taking a hesitant sip before securing it between his legs and pushing out of the tutoring offices. “Thanks, Re,” he said, after they’d gone awhile in silence.

“Did the test go all right?” Renee asked finally, as they wandered through the student center, as if she’d sensed it was finally safe.

Kai led her to a lounge area, a group of couches and tables for students to gather. Kai parked so he wasn’t blocking through traffic and gestured for Renee to sit. He sipped the hot drink slowly, which helped settle his grumpy stomach and eased the tightness in his chest some.

“I don’t think I failed, so that’s something,” Kai said, forcing a smile.

Renee curled up on the seat closest to Kai, wrapping her arms around one of his, laying her head on his shoulder. “I know you did well,” Renee said, squeezing his arm. Kai caught the confident “know” and appreciated her not digging for more. He didn’t want to think about history this weekend. “Let’s do something.”

Kai finished his milk and leaned forward to set his drink aside. Renee was snuggled up beside him, clearly not caring who saw them together, wheelchair and all. She was just happy to be cuddling with her boyfriend on a Friday afternoon. It wasn’t too early to think Renee thought of him that way? Did she even *want* to think of him that way? Or would his novelty fade and she decide he was too much trouble to bother with? Especially once she learned his MLS was only part of the package?

As the hydroxyzine wore off, all the anxiety began to pour illogically out into his increasingly erratic thoughts.

“Kai.” He felt Renee’s hands gripping his wrists. When had he covered his face with them? And when had his breathing become harsher? “Kai,” she said again, managing to speak firmly, yet soothingly at the same time, “the test is over. Stop thinking about it and tell me what we’re going to do tonight.”

“Like what?” He asked in his best nonchalant voice. He tried to take slow, even breaths, hating how his body got away from him, how it made him feel threatened even when he knew everything was perfectly fine. After all, there were far bigger problems in the world than a history test, or whether or not he and Renee would last the semester. And a few days of bad coughing didn’t mean he wasn’t cured. Kai could almost hear Dr. Miller’s voice, *You’re discounting your feelings again*. He sighed. Maybe it had been too soon to drop down to seeing her only once a week, as much as he hated to admit it.

“I don’t know . . .” Renee squeezed Kai’s hands, kissed his knuckles, glanced up

at him with a smile. It was an, “I’ve gotcha,” moment without being fussy. Just what he needed. “What would you do tonight if I wasn’t around?”

Kai breathed deeply, then took back his hands so he could use them to shift his weight in his chair. He felt himself coming down a bit from the anxiety, though it still hummed in his chest. “Honestly?”

Renee nodded, accepted a chaste kiss.

Kai clung to her a moment before releasing her again. “It’s not very exciting, but I’d probably go home and sleep.” He smiled tiredly.

“Did you stay up late studying?”

Kai started to say no, but realized that might leave him open for telling her about his anxiety or his “asthma”— neither of which he wanted to do while exhausted and desperate for another dose of hydroxyzine, while in the middle of the student center. Instead, he said, “Why don’t you come back to my place with me; I’ll make a quick dinner and we can watch a movie or something?”

Renee stood behind Kai as he peered into cabinets. She’d noticed his stress and tension had lingered even after the exam was over, and though she’d tried to distract him with her kiss and touch, he’d been distant. She’d discovered Kai often withdrew, like a turtle into its shell, but to protect himself from what she wasn’t certain. She just had to be patient and wait for those glorious moments, like on Halloween, when his curtain had come down and he’d been delightfully silly and sweet and wonderful.

“Well, I guess with the midterm I got a little distracted and didn’t go to the grocery store. But I can get creative, if you don’t mind vegetarian.”

“My maw maw told me never to complain when someone else is doing the cooking,” Renee said, accepting cans as he pulled them out of the pantry. Chickpeas, tomato sauce, crushed tomatoes.

“Can you check the freezer for spinach?” Kai asked as he pushed across the kitchen, leaning forward to snag a bowl of onions and pulling one out.

Renee set the cans on the counter and grabbed a package of frozen spinach. “Can I help with anything else? Preferably something that will ensure I don’t burn down the apartment complex?”

Kai laughed. “You know how to chop onions? I have to do it on the table, so if you could help with that, it’d be great.” He set the onion on the counter, then pulled out a cutting board and a knife, setting them aside as well.

“I think I can handle that.” Renee started peeling and chopping while Kai bustled around, taking out cookware.

“Uh, do you want me to make rice or pasta or something? I don’t usually bother, because it’s too much carbs for Jon and I don’t really care either way, but I can, if you want.” Kai set out a pot and a skillet, then snagged a towel and the can opener to start opening the food.

“I don’t even know what you’re making.”

“Uh,” Kai said, stretching to drain the chickpeas in the sink, “something Italian-y.”

Renee laughed, relieved to see Kai joking around. “OK. You do know how to cook, right? You’re not just trying to impress me?”

“Hmm,” Kai said, dumping the chickpeas into a pot, then stretching again to fill it with some water. She noticed the unmodified kitchen made things awkward for him, but like everything he did, he’d figured out his own way to do things, working as

seamlessly as possible under the circumstances. “Guess you’ll have to find out.” He winked, set the pot on the stove, and turned it on. “Chickpeas take forever. This’ll soften them up while we cook the onions.”

“They’re ready,” she announced. “Should I put them in a bowl or something?”

“Nah, just bring them over when I say,” Kai said as he set the skillet to heat. “Can you cook the spinach? Put it in a bowl and zap it in the microwave three minutes. We just want to get it defrosted. I’ll finish cooking it in the pan.”

Renee obeyed; it felt nice, cooking together, and she noticed he’d continued to relax as he focused on prepping dinner, the exam seemingly forgotten. It wasn’t the most exciting way to spend a Friday night, but she wouldn’t trade it for anything. Especially if it meant she’d see him smiling. Not one of his faked or forced grins, but one of his beautiful, lopsided, genuine smiles she loved seeing so much.

“The onions?”

She heard the sizzle of hot oil and vaguely got the impression Kai had asked her more than once. “Oh, coming!” She carried the cutting board over and watched as he slid the onions into the pan with a spatula.

Renee stood by as Kai browned the onions, then drained the chickpeas and added the spices, tomatoes, and sauce, covering it and letting it simmer for a few minutes. It could have been the fact that she was hungry, but it smelled delicious. “So . . . I grew up helping a grandmother who cooks better than anyone I’ve ever met, and I still can barely make toast. Who taught you?”

Kai pointed to himself. “It was something to do after . . .” Kai hesitated. “. . . I got out of County House,” Kai finished, as if he were speaking about prison. “I found I liked it.”

“Well, I think it’s pretty sexy,” Renee said.

Kai laughed, lifted the lid to check the sauce. “I think we’re ready for the spinach, if you’ll bring it over.”

“Plus, I’ll never go hungry as long as I’m with you.”

That really made him laugh as they added the final ingredient together. Their eyes met, and Kai smiled one of his relaxed grins before looking away to stir in the spinach. “Let that heat up a bit,” he said, covering it and setting the spatula aside.

“So, teach me some signs,” Renee said, figuring she’d make use of her time. She’d gotten some books out of the library, but having Kai teach her worked so much better than trying to interpret a drawing in a book.

“*Cook*,” Kai demonstrated, speaking the English word as he did the sign.

Renee attempted to imitate: right hand on top of left, then flipped until it returned back to rest.

“*Music*,” Kai said and signed, confusing Renee initially until she realized it was similar, though it looked more like waving the fingers of his right hand along his left forearm. “Some people do those signs almost identically, so, remember, context.” He repeated the sign, this time on his hand, and she could see how the two could be confused.

She nodded, repeated them both.

“*Eat*,” Kai tapped his closed right hand, fingers straight, on his lips. “That means food, too.”

Renee tapped her left wrist, then brought her hand to her lips, making sure to arch her brows. Kai didn’t respond immediately, and she began to deflate, thinking she’d done it wrong.

But a shy smile twisted its way onto his face, and he offered a slight nod, then signed using a lot of pointing and the outline of something in the air. A bowl? She caught him repeating *TIME* and *EAT*, but she was afraid she had to admit she'd lost him.

She shook her head, flicking up her right index finger, indicating she didn't understand.

He laughed. "I was asking you to grab a bowl," he said, awkwardly trying to match the ASL to the English for her sake, though it was clear it didn't match up very well. "In ASL, you always have to identify who you're talking about first. So I have to identify you, and the where and what I want you to get, then tell you to bring it to me. We can go into that more later. Let's eat."

A few minutes later, they were sitting diagonally from each other at the table, partaking of Kai's creation. "Wow, this . . . is *really good*." Renee used the sign for *GOOD*, emphasizing it in the way she signed and in her face; she'd noticed Kai's eyes always lit a little more for her when she was signing, and she loved to see that sparkle.

Kai chuckled, picked at his food, as always, and forced himself to take a few bites. "Chickpeas have a pretty meaty flavor, but adding some Worcestershire sauce helps." He shrugged. "I know it's technically not a vegetarian ingredient, but I figure a little anchovy won't kill me."

Renee smiled. "I don't think I've ever had a guy cook me dinner who wasn't related to me."

Kai shrugged again, took a few more reluctant bites. "I'm glad you like it."

They ate in silence for a few minutes, Renee unable to ignore how even a meal he cooked himself Kai approached like an obligation he wished he could get out of. Finally, Renee felt her curiosity bubble up, unable to contain it any longer. She attempted to sign it, hoping she wouldn't flub it too bad and he might be more receptive. "*Why do you hate eating so much? Even when you cook it yourself?*"

Kai watched her signing, smiling faintly; apparently she'd made herself clear enough. He glanced down at his half-eaten bowl and shrugged again. "*Would it surprise you if I said that's not a simple answer?*" he responded, sim-comming for her sake. She noticed he reached over for a sugar shaker, like the kind you found in diners, and sprinkled some onto his food the way someone might add parmesan, mixing it up.

She shook her head. "Not at all. I'm beginning to think your entire life consists of answers you can give with a shrug, headshake, or nod, or that would rival the greatest works of literature for complexity and length."

That made him smile, lean back. Nod.

She laughed, pointed to the sugar. "Is it because you have really weird tastes and I wouldn't eat it if you had cooked it the way you liked it?"

Kai's eyebrows furrowed, and he tilted his head as he forced another couple mouthfuls. His actions were so measured, like a child counting his bites before his mother would give him permission to leave the table. But then, maybe he actually was doing that: *must eat twenty bites today*, Renee thought with amusement.

Finally, after mulling it over, he responded, "I eat because I have to," and punctuated it with a shrug. He drummed the fingers of his left hand, his gaze going distant. She'd either lost him again, or he was calculating what to say next. Finally, he said, his voice strangely meek, "Re, remember I told you there was more than the chair?"

She nodded, trying to suppress her confusion. Was Kai actually going to volunteer information without her needing to extract it slowly and painfully like a

stubborn tooth?

"I . . ." Kai seemed to be struggling as to how to proceed, and he took another couple bites of his meal. "*I want to be honest with you about myself,*" he said, shifting to ASL, as if that made it easier for him to get his point across. "*Why I'm 22-years-old and starting college. Why remembering is hard.*" He used listing when he signed, pointing to each of his first two fingers before explaining each, slow and deliberate, choosing his signs carefully to ensure she understood. Kai had explained listing was an important element of ASL, and since he'd told her that, she'd observed how it leaked into his English: firstly, second. . . .

Renee nodded, waiting for him to continue.

Kai's fingers fluttered in the air in front of him, as if he were trying to decide how to proceed. Several quiet moments passed, Kai's eyes shut, likely debating inwardly how to tell her whatever it was he was going to explain. But then he dropped his hands, rubbed his chest, his eyebrows furrowing. He took a few breaths that looked effortful.

"Kai?"

"I'll. . . . Excuse me a minute," he said suddenly, pushing away from the table, disappearing before Renee could say anything else.

Confused, Renee sat at the table, finishing her food before finally deciding to make herself useful by clearing their dishes. She'd gathered most of them when she suddenly heard Kai coughing. Hard, almost like he were choking on something. She abandoned the plates and rushed to his door, pressing her ear against it.

"Kai? Are you OK?"

Nothing but more harsh coughing, so her hand went to his doorknob, ready to turn it. But they weren't at a point in their relationship where she could just burst into his bedroom uninvited, so she waited a moment more, her ears peeled.

"I'm fine. Be right out."

His voice seemed strange, forced, breathy, but maybe he'd just had something go down the wrong pipe. She listened a while longer, heard him cough a few more times, but forced herself to resume her task of cleaning up. She was in the kitchen, almost finished with the dishes when she heard the minor creak of his chair as he rolled in. He looked even more tired than before, his chest and shoulders working a little harder than they should. Was it his asthma? Maybe his distance, tension, she'd seen earlier had been tied to his breathing rather than worry over the test? Was that maybe what he'd wanted to tell her about before he'd rushed into his bedroom? But how did that tie into his late start at college or his memory issues?

She waited for an explanation, but he didn't offer one, and she decided not to press him now. If he wasn't telling her anything voluntarily, she wouldn't get much from poking him. She'd learned that much about Kai, anyway.

As they moved together in silence around the small kitchen, putting the leftovers away, she could hear a subtle, audible wheeze in his breath.

Would being with Kai always be this way? Like exploring a vast building filled with sealed rooms, praying she'd find a fraction of them unlocked and open to her?

The playful, relatively forthcoming man of Halloween night had morphed back into this quiet, reserved, pensive version of himself, like the dark side of the moon, distant, shadowed, hidden.

"I guess I should go."

"What?" he said suddenly, as if her words had snapped him out of a trance. "No. Stay. I'm sorry." He offered a smile, which, though tired, appeared genuine. He

signed and spoke, eyebrows raised, “*Do you like Oreos?*” A bit of the child she’d glimpsed a few days ago pierced his outer barricades, as he pulled a package of holiday cookies from one of the lower cabinets. “I ate the Halloween ones. They’ve already moved onto Christmas. I’ll share.” He held up the package, adorned with a Santa and snowflakes, depicting the festively dyed cookie centers. He looked at her with puppy eyes, and she couldn’t resist a smile.

“Milk?”

“You don’t *need* milk for Oreos, he said, laying the package in his lap, “but I’ll pour you some if you want.”

“Let’s eat them on the couch?”

He brightened further, following her.

She curled up much as she had the week before, when he’d brought her back here after PT, accepting the cookies as he transferred, heaving his body over onto the cushions, using his hands to help ease himself closer to her.

He smiled, plucked the package out of her lap and tore it open, snagging a few Oreos, offering her his palm for her to take what she wanted.

She accepted a couple, watching him with a faint smile. He seemed to be feeling better—maybe he’d taken some medicine in his bedroom—as his eyes sparkled.

“Are you a cookie-or filling-first Oreo eater?” she asked.

“Filling,” he said, twisting several open and using his teeth to scrape the red and green frosting off.

She laughed as he ate the filling out of half a dozen before munching on the cookies.

“I can eat a whole package in one sitting if I’m not careful,” he admitted with a slight blush.

“So sweets are never a chore to eat,” Renee said with a wink.

Kai shrugged. “Dessert is different,” he responded in his usual cryptic manner. He licked a few more cookies, his tongue searching for any remaining frosting. Then Kai seemed to realize what he was doing, blushed, and hurriedly popped the cookie in his mouth.

Renee shook her head, smiled, and twisted open hers, also eating the frosting first. He seemed to approve.

They shared about half the package, Kai eating most of them, when he yawned, stretched, and set the Oreos aside. He pushed his body forward in the seat, using his hands, then adjusted his legs, stretching them out, reclining, his head on the back of the couch.

She took his cue and snuggled down beside him.

“D’you have a big family?” he asked lazily.

His question caught her off guard, but maybe the festive cookies had gotten him thinking of Christmas and family. Whatever it was, it meant maybe he was relaxing again, willing to talk about more than cookies and superficial things.

“Yeah. My maw maw was one of 13, and my paw paw had eight brothers and sisters. There’s a lot of us.”

He held her close, and with her ear on his chest, she could hear a faint gurgle with each breath, like he had the beginnings of a chest cold.

“Did you dream of having a big family?”

Kai chuckled faintly. “Every orphan imagines what having a family is like at least once. Comes with the territory.” He yawned. “Mostly, I just wished for my brother

back.”

“You two were close?”

“Mmm. He’s eight years older, so he took care of me. I don’t really remember my parents, but I remember Jon.” Kai yawned again. “I used to imagine and hope he’d come for me, but like a kid growing out of faith in Santa Claus, I figured out believing in something that would never happen was only a recipe for disappointment.”

“Kai—”

Kai half laughed, half yawned, then spoke slowly, sleepily, “Ironically, he did come for me. Right before I aged out. Saved me.”

Renee wanted to ask what Kai meant, but his body had gone heavy against her, his head drifting to rest on top of hers, snoring faintly. He’d fallen asleep, in the middle of their conversation, almost without warning, and she found it amusingly endearing.

She felt him shiver against her, but when she extracted herself from under him, she realized he was still asleep. His hands were ice cold, though. Was he sick? Or could it be his blood pressure? She felt his face, which seemed a little chilled, not hot. She spied a large blanket folded and tucked into the bottom of the end table, managing to stretch and snag it, then drape it over them both. Renee curled up close to him again, trying to use her small body to help his get warm. She’d let him rest a little while, then she’d have to leave, grateful she’d followed him over in her own car this time.

He let out a small, achingly adorable sigh of contentment and pulled her closer, still sound asleep. It wouldn’t hurt to stay a little while, Renee thought, closing her eyes.

November 4, 2000

Renee woke suddenly, uncertain of where she was, to the sound of a key scraping in a lock. Her heart immediately began to race in her chest; Kai was still beside her, but sound asleep. She debated waking him for a moment, her breath held, as she waited for the door to open. She knew, inwardly, she had nothing to worry about—after all, Kai was right here, and whoever was coming in had a key, but her body had other ideas, and she had to struggle to keep herself calm.

Finally, someone emerged through the entrance, a tall, lanky figure shaking out his hair and slipping out of a long overcoat. As he stepped into the light, she noticed the white coat and the blond hair. She hadn't met him in person, yet, but this had to be Kai's brother, Jon. Dr. Taylor.

He seemed to be making his best effort to be quiet as he entered the kitchen; Renee realized now, with a quick glance to the VCR, that it was almost three in the morning. She and Kai had been asleep hours.

She heard beeping, like Jon was heating something in the microwave, and decided to carefully slip out from Kai's embrace and the warmth of the couch. She'd say a quick hello to Jon, then be on her way. She needed to be at Lost Apple in five hours.

As she approached the kitchen, she could see Jon's back, leaning against the counter, watching the microwave. She attempted to balance being quiet—so as not to wake Kai—and loud enough so as not to startle Jon.

She stood in the entrance to the kitchen, finally clearing her throat. He contained his jump, but gaped at her, shocked and confused—though he looked disturbingly like Kai, only older, he obviously didn't have Kai's self-control over his emotions.

"I'm sorry; I was trying not to scare you."

He blinked. "You must be Renee."

She nodded, offered her hand. They shook quickly; Jon clearly was either still unsettled by her sudden appearance or he just didn't know what to say to her. "Kai fell asleep, and I guess I did, too," she said in explanation. "On the couch."

Jon nodded, stared at her awkwardly.

She gestured for the door with her thumb. "I should probably go."

Jon took in a breath. "It's actually really nasty out there. Black ice. You're welcome to stay the night here. You can take my bed. Or Kai's. If he's still sleeping, he probably won't wake up until the morning."

Renee smiled at Jon's consideration. Even though she'd lived through last winter here, her experience in driving in ice and snow wasn't extensive. Still, she wasn't the most comfortable with the idea of spending the night in an apartment with two men she barely knew.

The microwave beeped, and Jon hesitated a moment before reaching for it, though he seemed unsure if he should eat or not, as if waiting for Renee's permission. It was crazy how much alike the two brothers looked and yet how different they were, personality wise. Kai always seemed in control of a situation, carefully crafting what to say and guiding the conversation in the direction of his choosing. Jon seemed to flounder, like someone who barely knew how to swim trying to keep his head above water.

Renee recognized the smells of the dinner she'd help Kai cook earlier. "It's

good. Don't let me stop you," she said finally.

Jon nodded and began eating, not quite with relish, though he clearly enjoyed his food more than his brother despite the fact that he looked like he weighed at least twenty pounds less. "Did he take his medicine? Do you know?"

Renee shook her head. "I don't, but I think he did."

Jon sighed, nodded. He ate quickly, hurriedly, clearly tired and ready for sleep himself. "I can drive you home, if you want," Jon offered, though she could see he was exhausted and only offering to be nice. "Kai can pick you up in the morning and bring you back to your car."

Renee sighed. "Kai wouldn't mind if I stayed?"

Jon looked at her, confused, as he pulled a zippered pouch out of one of the drawers. "Kai would be furious with me if I let you drive home in this weather." She watched him prick his finger with a little device—he didn't even flinch—then squeeze the blood out onto a test strip. "My bed's bigger, but Kai's room is warmer. I can get you something to sleep in."

He went through the rest of the motions of what she assumed was checking his blood sugar, not thinking anything about injecting himself in front of her. Once he finished, he signaled for her to follow him.

He led her to his own bedroom, which was sparsely furnished and even less decorated than the rest of the apartment, pawing through a few drawers before he found something. A pair of pink plaid flannel PJs. "Uh, these pajamas are my girlfriend's; they'll be a bit big, but probably fit better than any of our clothes." He pointed. "That's my bathroom, if you want to change in there. I'm going to go check on Kai."

Renee emerged a few minutes later; she'd rolled up the pants at the legs and the waist, and tied the shirt to help keep it in place. She probably looked ridiculous, but she was warm, and she wouldn't have to risk getting in an accident out on the icy roads. Jon was repositioning Kai, who was still sound asleep, shifting him onto his back and tucking a pillow under his legs before covering him with an extra blanket. Jon's movements were tender, feeling Kai's forehead and cheeks and examining his hands as if Kai were his son instead of his brother.

"Is he OK?" Renee asked in a whisper.

Jon looked up. Nodded. "His blood pressure's a little low, but positioning him like this will help. He's really out," Jon said with a faint smile. "Did you decide where you want to sleep?" Jon asked, standing up.

"Uh," Renee toed the ground. "I guess Kai's room. I hate to put you out anymore than I am already."

Jon's smile broadened, reminding her more of his brother, but he shook his head. "All right, well, it's right through there. He should have fresh sheets in his bathroom, if you want them, and his alarm is set for seven, but you can turn it off if you want."

"That's perfect. He'll really be OK on the couch?"

Jon laughed. "If he hasn't woken up yet? Yeah, he'll be fine." Then Jon stretched, yawned, and flicked off most of the lights, though not all of them, oddly enough, Renee observed, disappearing into Kai's room.

Kai's bedroom was tidy, but not as IKEA-catalog neat as the rest of the apartment, or his brother's room. The surface of the low dresser off to one side was dotted with

prescription bottles, pens, sticky note pads, small crumpled papers, partially empty bottles of water and sports drink. An old photograph was tucked into the corner of the mirror, below a cascade of post-its with notes scrawled in Kai's slanting, hurried handwriting. Things like, *Call Jake. Prepare 1st Date Sun. Pick up Rx. Appt w/ Dr. Mic - Nov 16 @ 2PM. Buy Gatorade.*

An unmade, extra-long twin bed, like the kind Renee remembered from the dorm, was pushed up against the far wall, a single nightstand and lamp beside it, the shelves of which were full of items she couldn't quite identify at first glance. An inhaler and a novel—clearly a library book—lay on its surface. In the far corner, near the bed, stood a pair of forearm crutches, the scuffs on the wall indicating he often leaned them there, and Kai's black knee brace. His leather braces, the ones she'd seen him wearing in PT, were no where to be seen, perhaps stored away in the closet opposite. On the other wall was a low bookshelf, sparsely filled with well-worn novels and a couple textbooks. She noticed the copy of *The Velveteen Rabbit* Kai had purchased the other day at the reading.

But other than the single photograph, nothing personalized the room. No mementos or pictures, no photos or decorations. It was clearly lived in, evidence of Kai's presence everywhere—including the overflowing hamper beside the dresser—but without looking at the name on the prescription bottles, without knowing that brace and crutches were his, it could easily have been any young guy's room. It looked like Kai's instinct to hide went farther than his reticence to talk to her.

She resisted the temptation to pry in his closet or drawers, or to check any of the prescription bottles for clues into Kai's life, though she did duck into his bathroom, figuring maybe he'd have some mouthwash she could use as a substitute for brushing her teeth.

Kai's bathroom was about twice as large as his brother's, though other than the high toilet pushed close to the wall and the grab bars like she'd seen in public restrooms, it seemed pretty standard, just with more space, obviously so he could maneuver his wheelchair in it.

Like his bedroom, the bathroom was impersonal yet visibly lived in, more prescription bottles scattered around—there seemed like an awful lot of them—along with several inhalers and plastic pieces she couldn't identify set carefully to dry on a towel. She spotted the mouthwash and poured some into a plastic cup she plucked from a stack off to the side. Using it quickly, she felt uncomfortably like she was invading Kai's carefully crafted privacy. She suspected part of his closing the door on her earlier, when he'd disappeared into his room, was as much to keep his domain private from her as to shield her from whatever it was he'd come in to do. Take his medicine, she presumed.

She opened the large cabinet near the door where she expected to find extra towels and sheets, spying these stacked neatly on a shelf, but below them she saw boxes of medical supplies, some she recognized, like surgical gloves and masks, and others she didn't. Further convinced her instincts about privacy invasion were right, and realizing she was even more tired than she'd thought, she decided to forget about changing the sheets and just go to sleep.

Renee sighed, flipped off the light, and returned to his bed, sinking down into it, realizing it was covered in pillows, like Kai was some kind of pillow hoarder. It made the narrow bed strangely comfortable, and they smelled reassuringly like him, so she gathered them up into a nest of sorts, pulled up the blankets, and soon slipped into a

contented sleep.

Kai woke slowly. The first thing he realized was how stiff he was, his neck and back tight. He opened his eyes, confused at first until he realized he was on the couch. He'd spent the entire night here? He rubbed at his neck, working his fingers into the muscle as he searched for the clock. Six-thirty AM. Ugh, no wonder he was tight. He'd taken his meds when he'd snuck into his room to cough, but hadn't bothered to stretch.

He used the back of the couch to pull himself up with a grunt. He felt a little dizzy, and suspected his blood pressure had dipped a bit, but he worked through it, yanking the pillow out from beneath his legs—had he done that? Leaning forward as much as his back would allow to stretch it.

Renee had come over, they'd had dinner, then they'd sat on the couch together. He must have fallen asleep. Had she left without waking him? Or had he woken but couldn't remember? But if he had, why hadn't he gone to his bed?

He heard someone moving around the kitchen as he continued to try to stretch himself loose. He pulled his legs off the couch one by one, glancing around for his chair. It wasn't where he remembered leaving it, but then he couldn't remember much of the night before. The good news was other than being tight and a little light headed, his chest felt clearer. Only a couple doses of the amphigarol and he was already clearing the mucus better. He reached for a handful of tissues and coughed. It was good news, of course, as he noted what he coughed up was still clear, and less sticky, though also bad: whatever caused his body to produce the abnormal gunk in his lungs that the amphigarol fought against obviously hadn't been cured by the transplant the way everyone had hoped.

"Kai?"

Kai coughed a few more times, wiped his mouth, and looked up. Jon stood with two mugs, offering him one. "I'm fine," Kai said, balling up the used tissues and accepting the mug. Hot milk with sugar. He took a few sips, then tried to stretch his back some more by arching his shoulders.

Jon took a seat at the other end of the couch, sipping his coffee. "Shh. Renee's asleep in your room."

"**What?!**" Kai fingerspelled rapidly with his free hand to express his shock.

"It was too dangerous for her to drive by the time I got home, so I offered to let her stay. You were asleep."

Kai groaned but said nothing else, rolling his neck to try to stretch it. He'd have to sneak through his own bedroom just to use the toilet or take his meds. Renee only knew a fraction of what life with him was like. He wasn't ready for a sleepover, which made him furious with Jon. But at the same time, if the weather was bad, Jon had done the right thing to keep her here. If Renee's safety meant Kai had to do some explaining sooner rather than later, and be slightly inconvenienced, then so be it. Kai sighed heavily, annoyed he couldn't even really be mad.

Jon seemed to be waiting for Kai's angry signed outburst.

Instead, Kai attempted to stretch again. "You were right to let her stay. I've gotta wake her up soon, anyway. She has work."

Jon blinked, a little surprised. "You sore? I didn't want to wake you . . ."

Kai sighed. "I could use a good massage," he said, smiling faintly. "But I'll live. I needed the sleep. I feel a lot better."

Jon nodded. *"Good. I was worried about you yesterday. I'm going to get a*

shower; I have clinic for a few hours, then I'm on the graveyard again." Jon sighed, rolling his eyes. He finished his coffee, then rose. "See you later."

A few minutes later, Kai snuck into his room, trying to be as quiet as possible. Renee was sprawled in his bed, looking adorable, her curls a frizzy disaster around her head, tangled up in the pillows and blankets and the borrowed pajamas several sizes too large for her. Man, he had to pee, not to mention take his morning meds, but glancing at the clock, his alarm would sound soon.

He debated for a moment, but finally, his bladder won out and he shut himself in the bathroom. His finger hovered over the lock. Kai never, *ever* locked himself in a residential bathroom. It was silly, and he told himself it was in case something happened, his brother or someone else could get to him, but even now, he couldn't bring himself to turn the lock. It was something Dr. Miller would probably chastise him about, but the risk of Renee walking in on him felt like less of a threat than a locked door, even if it was of his own making.

Kai had rigged up a urinal to use so he didn't have to transfer to pee. It was meant to attach to a bag, but he'd simply modified it so he put the end in the bowl so that while he peed, it drained directly into the toilet.

He'd just finished, cleaning his device and himself, when he heard his alarm. It'd be an inconvenience, but he could take his meds in his room and let Renee have his bathroom for a moment to shower. He gathered everything into a bag, including his notebook and pen, set it in his lap, and pushed out the door.

Renee had managed to shut off the alarm, and was sitting up in his bed, her hair a frazzled mess, looking so small, still waking up. But she smiled when she saw him. "Morning."

"Morning," he said, echoing her smile. "I hope you slept well?"

She nodded, patting the pillows. "Deceptively comfortable." She stretched, then seemed to remember she wasn't completely dressed and her hair was a mess, pulling the blankets higher around herself. "This would be awkward if I weren't wearing someone else's pajamas and sitting in an usurped bed."

He chuckled, feeling a warmth in his belly at the idea of Renee waking up in his bed, even if he hadn't slept in it with her. "I'll be the gracious host and yield my bathroom to you. There's towels if you'd like to shower. I also should have some unopened toothbrushes in the bottom left cabinet; I like to change them monthly, so I always keep a few extras. Take your time. I'll go make some coffee for you, in case Jon drank it all."

Renee beckoned him close, so he obeyed, pushing to the edge of the bed. She got up on her knees and leaned in for a kiss, short but deliciously sweet. "Thank you for being a gentleman."

"I'm the one who fell asleep on you last night. Sorry about that."

"Well, you'll just have to make it up to me tomorrow for our surprise 'first' date." She grinned and pulled him in for another kiss that made him melt inside.

"You're going to love it. It's bingo Sunday at the Prairie Valley Retirement Home." He realized he was smiling, a silly grin, his lip between his teeth.

But Renee was beaming back at him. "I can't wait." She winked, planted a quick peck on his cheek, before hopping around him and disappearing into the bathroom.

"You're in love with her," Jon signed single-handedly as he poured himself yet more

coffee from the fresh pot Kai had made for Renee, filling a large to-go cup.

"I'm not," Kai signed quickly, turning his back on his brother to signal the conversation was over, opening the fridge to see if he had anything he could make her for breakfast.

Jon tapped firmly on Kai's shoulder, so Kai reluctantly looked up. *"I think she's in love with you, too."*

"Whatever," Kai signed dismissively. *"Don't you have work?"*

"She seems nice," Jon said in a whisper. *"Don't push her away."*

Kai glared at Jon, but Jon only smiled and waved.

"I'll be late again tonight."

"Falling in love, maybe," Kai conceded. *"But not love love,"* Kai said, fingerspelling one of the "loves" for emphasis. *"Since when are you the expert, anyway?"*

Jon just smiled. *"Maybe the four of us should have dinner? Maybe once I'm back on a normal schedule?"*

Kai nodded vaguely, lost in his thoughts. Jon might be socially clueless at times, but he was observant. Part of what made him so good at his job. Could it really be possible? Renee barely knew him, and he barely knew her. Jon was probably just overeager to see Kai happy after the disasters of Becca and Nikki. Right?

Renee slipped into Kai's bathroom, her clothes from the night before bundled in her arms. She twisted the lock; she trusted Kai and his brother, but it made her feel a little safer. She left her clothes on the sink, then fished a couple towels out of the cabinet, stripping out of her borrowed PJs. She shivered and rushed to the shower.

It was a tub shower similar to the one in her own apartment, but when she pulled the curtain away, she noticed a few minor differences. The first was a white plastic chair set into the tub; it had handles built into the seat. Next, she spotted two more grab bars, then that the showerhead had been converted to a hand wand and mounted lower on the wall, so it was easily reachable from the seat. Renee had wondered, vaguely, how Kai showered. Now she knew.

She reached in and turned the water on hot to get some steam going, observing how, like a typical man, Kai's bath products consisted of only soap and shampoo. She sighed, testing her hair. It normally took special hair products to keep it manageable; and about half a cup of conditioner to prevent it drying out, especially in the winter. She could take her chances with just shampoo, or leave it unwashed and pull it into a bun and hope no one would notice. She tucked it up now, twisting her curls together, then wrapping them around each other and pulling the end through to hold them in place.

She cautiously stepped into the shower, realizing, even as short as she was, it would be awkward trying to stand in front of the shower chair—which she wasn't too keen on moving—what if she broke it? And she'd probably have to hold the wand to really get good coverage, even if she decided not to wash her hair. Yet she was hesitant to sit in the seat, too. Even though Kai had given her permission to use his bathroom, it still felt wrong, like an intimacy they weren't quite ready for. Of course she knew he was disabled, and the wheelchair did make it pretty obvious, especially when he was transferring in and out of it, his legs so still when they weren't spasming, standing in his shower suddenly made it real.

She'd assured him she didn't mind if he never walked again, but as she finally let herself sink into the seat, it hit her: had she really thought through what being with

someone like Kai would mean? In only a couple weeks, she'd be spending Thanksgiving with her family, and everyone usually gathered at her maternal grandparents' house, which had been in the family for generations. It was a large, 150-year-old Victorian house, raised almost an entire story above the ground to keep it protected from seasonal floods and even the worst hurricane's rains.

But that also meant steps. Lots of steps. And more inside, since the bedrooms were all on the second or third floors. Her parents' house, the home where she'd grown up, was of a similar design. And that didn't even account for doors that weren't wide enough or a bathroom too small for him to maneuver in. Kai was resourceful, of course—she'd seen it first hand, but inventiveness could only take him so far. There were things, probably a long list if she forced herself to really think of them—that Kai would not be able to do.

She reached for the soap—plain, unscented, to start cleaning herself when she heard a gentle knock on the door. “I'm not done,” she said stupidly; he had to hear the running water.

“I made coffee and I'm going out to scrape the ice off your windshield as long as you're not blocked in. Just thought I'd let you know.”

Renee smiled despite herself, a warmth filling her that had nothing to do with the water. She'd just been imagining Kai's limitations, and yet he was offering to go out in the cold and prep her car for her. She wasn't sure exactly how he'd manage, but just like in the kitchen yesterday, he had to have a system. Maybe life with Kai wouldn't be the same as it would be with an able-bodied man, and maybe he'd have to find work arounds and do things differently, but she couldn't hide the way her stomach felt wonderfully knotted up at the thought of being with Kai long enough she'd need to find out what all the complexities of his life might be.

Renee had been distracted all day, grateful the store wasn't too busy, unable to stop thinking about Kai. Not only about him in general—his rare genuine smiles, the sparkle in his blue eyes, the rich sound of his laughter, the subtle clean maleness of his smell, the roughness of his skin along hers. How nice it had felt, feeling his head leaning against hers, his arm wrapped around her as they slept together on his couch. How strangely wonderful his bed had been. But also about what he'd started to tell her before disappearing. And all those prescription bottles. He had told her more than once his health was complicated. She'd given into temptation after her shower and had read the labels on a few of the bottles in his bathroom, all of which had apparently been to control or treat his MLS, plus one whose instructions read, *Take one tablet up to four times daily as needed for nausea and vomiting*. At that point, she'd decided she shouldn't pry anymore and had resumed getting dressed. But that last prescription had made her wonder: was that why Kai hated eating? Because he often felt sick? And did he feel that way because of his “complicated health,” or was it a side effect of the myriad medicines he took? Maybe she could ask him tomorrow. Or maybe he'd finish telling her whatever it was he'd started to say.

A thump as a book was thrown down in front of her on the counter drew her out of her repetitive cycle of thoughts.

“Is this everything?” Renee asked automatically as she pulled the book closer to ring it up. She noticed the title, *Redefining SLUT: Female Sexuality in the 21st Century*.

“So. How was he?” Renee looked up at the voice, seeing Diane, leaning on the counter, arms crossed, eyebrows raised.

“What?”

“*Someone* didn’t come home last night.”

Renee blinked.

Diane leaned in. “And despite that sweater, which I know you keep in your car, you’re also wearing the same clothes you wore yesterday.”

Renee blushed fiercely, even though she had no reason to, grateful there weren’t any customers around and Art was in his office.

“I’ve been watching you for the past fifteen minutes, and your look was the perfect combination of dreamy and confused and contemplative, which screamed—to me—that you had sex last night.” Diane was beaming triumphantly.

“I’m at work, Diane. This is totally not the place.”

“Fine. Tell me all about it tonight. But you’ve never been one to *not* kiss and tell.”

Renee sighed heavily. “Are you even buying this?” She hefted the book in the air.

“Just trying to get your attention. You said this guy was different—“

Now Renee was getting mad. “He *is*. We did sleep together last night, but not the way you think. We fell asleep on his couch, and it was late and bad road conditions when I woke up, so I was invited to stay. He was a perfect gentleman. He even went out and scraped the ice off my windshield this morning.”

Diane studied Renee, obviously skeptical.

“Look, Diane,” Renee said. “There’s something about him you should know. I’ve been meaning to tell you, but there’s never been a ‘right’ time, and now seems like the wrong time for everything, so why not.” Renee paused, took a deep breath. “He uses a wheelchair. He can’t walk. Well, he can, kind of. It’s . . . complicated.” Renee found herself smiling, huge and silly. Kai was so right. There was no simple way to explain his disability.

Diane’s mouth opened, her eyes narrowing. “Wait. You always talked about how tall he is. And you never said anything about. . . . And how can he both walk *and* not walk? It’s one or the other.”

“We’ll talk more later,” Renee said, still smiling, taking another page out of Kai’s book and directing the conversation confidently. “But I’m serious about us, and I’m pretty sure he feels the same way. So I’d appreciate your support.”

Jon jogged into the pulmonology outpatient clinic, hoping to find Vicky there for some kissing if nothing else before his first patient arrived. He’d only managed a few hours’ sleep, and he was on shift again that night, but the strong coffee he’d consumed that morning helped energize him, not to mention the prospect of seeing Vicky, their first chance to be alone since she’d entertained him in his office on Halloween night.

Her hair was formed into a long, thick braid that dipped over her shoulder as she stood at the front desk, frowning as she double-checked she’d pulled the right patient files for the morning. Jon’s heart sped its beat, and it wasn’t simply the caffeine overload.

“Morning,” Jon said, sneaking up behind her and wrapping his arms around her, pulling her into a hug against him.

She gasped in surprise before laughing, batting his hands off her enough she could turn around and drape her arms around his neck. “Morning,” she said, offering him a short but deliciously sweet kiss. “I never thought I’d actually look forward to

Saturday-morning clinic with you so much. I feel like this is the first time I've been able to spend some time with you in ages."

Jon sighed. "I'm sorry. I'm ready for my crap schedule to be over, too, but I'd do it again to be there for Kai." He leaned in for another kiss, but Vicky pulled away.

"What about me?"

"What?" Jon said, his eyebrows dipping as he attempted the kiss again.

Vicky accepted, but kept it to a peck. "Would you do it for me?"

Jon dropped his grip on her, his hands falling to her hips, confused. "Is something wrong?" If Vicky were sick and he had been too busy to notice. . . .

Vicky laughed softly, as if she could see his mind working, racing for the worst scenario, laying a hand on his cheek. "No. I'm fine. But . . . if something did happen to me, and I needed you. Would you take off weeks of work for me?"

Maybe it was a lack of sleep, or simply his (acknowledged) limited understandings of the workings of the female brain, but Jon couldn't figure out why Vicky was asking him these things. Couldn't they just kiss?

Without giving him a chance to formulate a response, Vicky pushed him away, turning her back on him and gathering up the stack of patients' folders. She shoved them into his arms. "We're busy this morning," she said coolly before walking around him. A moment later, he heard her office door slam shut.

She was angry. What had he done wrong? Juggling the files in his arms, he tried to understand. She had a huge family—seven brothers and sisters, both parents and sets of grandparents, plus more cousins and aunts and uncles than Jon could count. Kai only had him. He'd give her some time to cool off, and make his apologies, and hope he could get her to explain what he was supposed to have said.

November 5, 2000

Renee laughed when Kai parked in front of the Jonesville Public Library. “I thought you promised me a real date.”

Kai turned to her, smiled one of his genuine smiles, one she was starting to believe was reserved just for her. “It is, but like us, it’s nothing conventional. If you hate it, I have a backup plan. Just . . . trust me?”

Renee raised an eyebrow, chuckling and nodding. She decided to wait in the lingering warmth of the car for now, watching as Kai popped his door open and carefully pulled the pieces of his chair over and out, listening to the click as each wheel was fixed in place. Then he twisted, grabbed his backpack and attached it to the back of his chair before lifting his body onto the cushion, adjusting his legs.

“Come on,” he said, hitting the lock and shutting the door. “Follow me.”

Kai lead her up the winding ramp that angled up toward the entrance, bypassing the numerous steps. The building was a bland box, likely constructed in the 1970s based on the color of the brick—a cream that was in bad need of power washing—and the shape of the windows, narrow and modern (thirty years ago). Especially coming from New Orleans, where buildings had real history, it was a travesty of architecture in Renee’s mind, though she wondered if anyone other than her even bothered to notice. Kai certainly didn’t, leaning forward, his shoulders and arms working hard to propel himself up the ramp. The cold air bit at Renee’s cheeks, and though it was a clear day, the forecast promised the first significant snow of the season for later that day.

Kai held the door open for her as he always did; Renee had learned quickly that here people weren’t as overtly polite as they were back home. Not necessarily rude, per se, but holding doors wasn’t something people generally did for one another. She’d noticed Kai didn’t like it when she did it for him—even though she did it reflexively—and wondered if his supposed chivalry was preemptive; Renee couldn’t hold the door for him if he was already holding it for her. Of course, she could be overthinking things, as she often did, according to Diane.

She smiled at him and walked through into the foyer, hearing the soft click as Kai rolled over the threshold behind her. Without a word, he took off at a brisk pace through the main walkway of the library, past the bank of computers on one side and fiction on the other. She had to admit she was curious, although she wondered if all of this could be some kind of elaborate joke.

Kai turned right at periodicals, cutting through nonfiction, using his hands on the shelves to propel himself forward where they were a little narrow, occasionally glancing back to make sure she was still following him. Finally, they reached a secluded back corner, shielded from the majority of the library by rows of dusty shelves filled with books on obscure topics that looked like no one had even bothered to touch them in quite some time. He wheeled up to a door that was marked “Staff Only” in bold letters, and pulled out a couple elongated pieces of metal, like straightened paper clips, out of a zippered pocket of his coat, then began working on the lock.

“What are you doing?” Renee said in a harsh whisper, easing closer and looking around nervously, certain some crotchety librarian would stumble onto them and beat them halfway to death with the thickest volume of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

“Shh. Relax,” he said without looking up from his work. Renee saw Kai’s hand jerk, heard a click, and the door creaked open far too loudly for Renee’s comfort. “Come

on,” Kai said, pushing in. She knew Kai was full of secrets, but lock picking? Another thing to add to her increasingly long list of “Things to Ask Kai Later.”

Reluctantly, Renee followed, easing the door closed behind her. “Should we be in here?” Renee asked cautiously, walking behind Kai. They were in a barely lit hallway, and Renee realized there was something more than a little creepy about this situation.

“Nope,” Kai responded. “Almost there.”

They reached another door, but this one was apparently unlocked—either it was left that way or Kai had already picked it earlier—he clearly had an agenda—and pushed it open. Renee hesitated before following him in. She heard the flick of a switch, then saw soft light begin to appear one by one, forcing her eyes to adjust as she approached.

Candles.

The room was enormous, the ceiling at least two stories high, apparently some kind of storage space, boxes and furniture and old books piled around, though someone—presumably Kai—had cleared a space in the center and left a ring of candles—ensconced in glass—on every surface remotely within reach from his wheelchair. He was now pushing around, lighting them, one by one. Renee took time to study the room, puzzling out why Kai had brought her here, when she noticed the window, barely illuminated by what remained of the meager overhead lighting. It had clearly been walled in and no longer faced the outside, but it was gorgeous. Over a story high, old, with bits of colored glass in abstract designs. That guided her eye to observe the room more clearly, noticing the wooden crown molding—carved simply and geometrically. The ceiling was molded plaster, water stained in some places, but the design was still visible, drawing her eye to what she realized now was a kind of balcony that circled the room, the rich wood dried and dusty from years of neglect, and the suggestion, behind them and the stacks of detritus, similarly artful bookshelves.

“What is this place?” Renee asked in wonder, searching out other hidden details she may have missed now that Kai’s candles had illuminated more of the space.

She heard his voice draw closer as he wheeled toward her. “The library was built in 1904, by Horatio Jones’s son, in the prairie style. It featured large windows, high ceilings, skylights, and open balconies, giving plenty of natural sunlight to read by. But in the 1970s, the town voted to expand and remodel the building, and the original architecture was lost, except for this room. It’s just used for storage, and no one ever comes in here, but I remembered Art telling me about it. I thought you might find it . . . interesting.”

Talk about atypical romantic gestures, Renee thought, remembering their conversation from the week before. “Kai . . . I don’t know what to say,” she finally admitted, looking down at him. He’d taken off his coat, and she saw he was wearing a navy long-sleeved T-shirt, loose enough to hide the scar at his neck and his shape, but the sleeves fit closely enough to outline the strong muscles in his arms.

He hid his frown, though she’d seen it fleetingly on his face. “I told you I have a plan B if you don’t like this.”

Renee shook her head. “I don’t like this.”

Kai nodded, started to turn, perhaps to snuff out the candles, when Renee reached forward, laying a hand on his arm to stop him. He glanced up at her, his face that purposeful unreadable mask she hated to see.

“I love it,” she said, leaning forward and kissing him lightly on the lips, feeling his surprise and relief. When she pulled back, he was smiling faintly, almost hesitantly.

“Really. It’s bizarre, but sweet. Very you.”

Kai laughed now, relaxed a little more. “Better than flowers?”

Renee joined his laughter. “Much better.”

“I asked my brother and friend what to do and they both said take you to dinner, but that seemed so . . . normal. Life with me will never be ‘normal.’ Thought you should get used to it early.” He grinned, but even so, she still saw the hesitancy, uncertainty, in his eyes.

“It’s a crime what they did to this building. It must have been so beautiful.”

“I never saw the original, but I imagined you of all people would appreciate this.”

Renee felt that indescribable pleasant feeling in her chest, not quite like the moment on a rollercoaster where you find yourself shooting down a steep incline, but close. She’d never felt that way before, but with Kai, it was becoming a regular sensation. She leaned forward, kissed him again. Reluctantly, she pulled away. Flashed a smile.

“Didn’t you know? All my boyfriends bring me to dusty hidden rooms on our dates.” Renee felt a light, happy feeling at the word that had slipped out easily—only a hint of regret afterward. Would Kai be annoyed with her presumption of essentially calling him her boyfriend?

“Hey, I dusted in here!” Apparently not, Renee realized with a rush of relief. “And if so, did you press charges? Because I really don’t think orange is my color.”

Renee managed a smile, but she couldn’t quite laugh, thinking of Jude. She pushed him from her mind. Today was about Kai, and new beginnings. “So what do we do now? Tell ghost stories?”

Kai pushed to one of the tables, yanked out a duffel, from which he pulled out a couple blankets. “Something like that,” he said with a playful smile.

Renee helped clear the plates and the Tupperware Kai had brought for their lunch out of the way. “So the other night wasn’t a fluke. You really can cook.”

Kai shrugged. “I hope vegetarian was OK. I thought of making meat for you, but my brother said if you’re going to be with me you need to accept my diet . . .”

Renee laughed softly. “It was delicious. Even better than the other night.” And it really was. Some kind of potato and pumpkin and lentil stew she was certain Kai must have spent most of Saturday cooking. “But can I ask you something?” She shut the last of the Tupperware and set it aside.

Kai shifted the pillow, rolled onto his stomach, propping his head up with his hands. “I think that’s why we’re here, isn’t it?”

The memory of the antiemetic medication Renee had found in Kai’s bathroom floated in the back of her mind, but she decided she’d put off asking about it for now—she didn’t want to ruin their first official date by potentially revealing how much of his privacy, his hard-earned trust, she’d violated. Instead, she asked another dietary question she’d been curious about, “You don’t strike me as a ‘meat is murder’ type.”

“You want to know why I went veg,” he said, shifting so he was leaning on one hand, his other arm draped across the pillow, gripping his elbow. He looked so sexy like that, peaceful, relaxed, the warm light of the candles highlighting the faint redish gold in his hair. It still seemed strange the way his legs lay so still except for the occasional minor twitch he barely seemed to notice.

Renee shrugged, bundled up some of the blanket and curled up on her side, facing him.

“My brother read some studies that showed that a vegetarian diet was correlated with a reduced amount of MLS flare ups. We both figured it wouldn’t hurt for me to try it.”

“And?”

“September’s major attack notwithstanding, I think it’s helped.”

“Well, I can get used to tofu if it means you won’t be in pain.”

Kai blinked, and his face shifted through several emotions, rapid-fire, almost impossible to distinguish individually. A shade of a smile lingered. “So you never really told me what a good New Orleans girl is doing in northern Iowa.” He said “New Orleans” in a fake accent, attempting to imitate the way she pronounced it, and it made her laugh.

She noticed how he had changed the subject, but she answered anyway. “I told you; JU has a good architecture program.”

“Mmm. And I’m sure there are good programs in New York or California or Chicago.”

“Jonesville is plenty far from home, and it pissed off my parents. Don’t think I’m callous for saying this, but sometimes not having parents has to be a blessing.”

Kai’s brows furrowed sternly. “I guess we both know a little something about hiding, then.”

Renee rose, paced back and forth in front of Kai several minutes, debating inwardly before speaking again. “When I was 16, I started dating one of my brother’s friends. In secret. He was 21. In college. It was fun. Exciting at first.” Renee hesitated. “I don’t know why I’m telling you this.”

“You don’t need to tell me anything,” he said, his voice neutral, but his eyes weren’t. She could see that whatever she was going to tell him, he wouldn’t judge her for it. *You can trust me, they said. I’ll understand.*

“We were . . . intimate. My first ‘real’ boyfriend,” Renee said with a sad laugh. “But after awhile . . . he started . . . taking me, even when I didn’t want him to.” She was almost surprised by how nonchalant her voice was, as if she were talking about something that had happened to someone else, like a rumor she’d heard whispered in the back of one of her classes.

Kai’s eyes darkened, but he kept his voice level. “He forced himself on you?”

Renee swallowed, nodded. “What was I going to do, though?” She wrapped her arms around herself. *It’s a little chilly in here without my coat*, Renee told herself. “I wasn’t underage anymore, and it was my word against his, and he comes from an old, wealthy Uptown family. Who was going to believe me when we’d had consensual sex before?”

Kai exhaled sharply through his nose before his eyes tracked back up to her. “So that’s what you’re running from? Him?”

Renee sighed, sank down beside him. She watched him move onto his side: first, by placing his hands on either side of his head, as if he were going to do pushups, pushing up and then walking his hands to help twist his torso till he was facing her. Then he reached down to adjust his legs, bending them slightly at the knee. The whole process wasn’t effortless, but Kai was evidently in good shape, the muscles she knew he had likely the byproduct of a solid workout regimen. Would he ever let her see them?

“Only my grandparents, my roommate, and now, you, know about what really happened between us. My parents keep hoping I’ll come to my senses and marry him.” Renee sighed. “I just had to get away from that. From them.”

Kai stretched out one arm, resting his head on his bicep. “I’d ask why you don’t

tell them, but that wouldn't even do justice to the cliché 'pot: kettle.'" He reached out for her hand, and she let him take it. His eyes found hers. "I wanted to take things slow between us . . . physically . . . anyway. I want this to be real. I don't want another relationship that starts with sex and turns into something else later. I want 'something else' to turn into sex." Kai sighed, his face scrunched up. "That sounds awful."

Renee smiled. "I know what you mean. I'd like that, too."

He smiled, soft and sweet, and beckoned her close. She stretched out beside him, letting him wrap his arm around her, her forehead resting against his chest. Somehow, in his warm embrace, she believed he would never let anything harm her.

"One question," he said after a while, his breath soft and warm on the top of her head.

"Yeah?"

"When you saw me in PT, found out the truth about my disability. . . . Said you still wanted me. . . . Was it partially because you saw me as non-threatening?"

Renee stiffened.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked."

But then she started laughing, pushing away so she could cover her mouth. She tried to stop, but she couldn't help it. "That's funny."

His eyebrows dipped sternly over his eyes, but all she saw in them was that penetrating sadness, despite the rest of his face remaining relatively neutral. "I'm the king of finding humor in inappropriate places, but you've lost me here."

She sucked in a breath to get herself under control. "I knew you were strong, but seeing you in PT proved that."

Now it was Kai's turn to laugh. "You're right; that is funny."

"Really. And the more I get to know you, the more I realize it's not just physical strength." Renee worked her fingers through Kai's hair; it fell midway past his ears now, and she tucked a few strands to the side. "Jude did what he did to me because, ultimately, he's a coward." She met Kai's eyes. "You're definitely not."

Kai sighed, pushed himself onto his back, not bothering to shift his legs, so his pelvis remained twisted, like he was halfway into a stretching routine. He stared upward into the vast shadows of the multistory ceiling. "Guess I shouldn't be surprised this unconventional date took a completely unconventional direction, conversation-wise."

Renee chuckled, settled down beside him again, tracing a finger along his chest, down to his stomach. "All right. How about a typical first-date question, then?"

"Blue, I'm allergic, and basketball player."

Renee laughed. "What?"

"My favorite color, do I like animals, and what I wanted to be when I was a kid. First-datey enough for you?"

Renee let out a long, trilling laugh. "OK, fair enough. Red. My mom hates animals, so we never had any pets. Architect."

It was Kai's turn to laugh now, rich and full. "Really. Your pipe dream when you were six was to be an architect. Not a rock star or an astronaut."

Renee stuck her tongue out at him. "I didn't know what it was called then, but yeah. I always knew I wanted to design buildings, even when I was a little kid."

"So you're literally living the dream."

"Working on it." She reached over, laid a hand on his thigh, just below his hip, wondering if he'd push her away. He looked at her, but otherwise didn't move. "What about you? I'm guessing the basketball thing didn't work out?" Her cheeks suddenly

flushed hot and she pulled her hand away. “I’m sorry. I—”

“It’s all right, Re,” he said. He pushed himself up, walking his hands until his torso was upright. Supporting himself with one hand splayed on the floor, he used the other to adjust his legs, first pushing on one so it rotated out at the hip, then reaching over to straighten each until they were stretched out in front of him. Renee noticed they naturally fell outward now, his feet splayed, since he wasn’t wearing his braces. The more she was with him, the more she realized every movement that anyone else would do easily took him a few extra steps; he had some control in his hips, but otherwise, his legs didn’t move unless it was by spasm or his hands guiding them.

. . . And the more she realized how much she loved being with him, watching him execute each calculated move, though he never seemed to think about how he’d do something. She supposed he’d had plenty of time to learn how to manipulate his body.

“Come here,” he said, nodding to his lap. “It’s OK.”

He’d explained about his injured right leg, but apparently it was healed enough he could take her weight. It made her blush, imagining climbing into his lap when he was in his chair, wrapping her legs around his backrest and kissing him long and hard until they both were panting for breath. She climbed over his legs, her knees bent, sitting on her calves, her hands on his shoulders, looking into his eyes. The candlelight was dimming; soon they’d have to head back, but for now she was going to enjoy him.

“I’m a big boy. I’m pretty sure, short of ‘good bye, I never want to see you again,’ there’s nothing you could say to me that would hurt my feelings.” He shifted his weight onto his right arm, lifted his left to guide his fingers along the side of her face, just a graze. It always made her eyelids drift downward as the pleasant tingle coursed through her. “I don’t want you to be afraid of being honest with me. OK?”

She nodded; forming words seemed to be too challenging right now. She reflexively shifted in his lap, pressing their crotches closer together. His arm wobbled, and he had to drop his other hand to keep himself upright.

He let out a short, reflexive moan. “Re.”

She smiled, kissed him, hard and probing, feeling his smile and his warmth somewhere else. She agreed with him that they should take things slow, but making out was still on the books, right? Her lips drifted to his cheek, his chin, his jaw, his neck, until she got to the scar he always hid; she could barely see it, partially masked by his collar, and she wondered if she shouldn’t press her luck, but he was breathing heavily, he was hard and using his hands to push himself closer to her, so she decided to take a risk. She kissed the edge of it, licking his skin just above it, waiting for him to tense and pull away. He did freeze for an instant, but he didn’t stop her.

“Will you tell me about your scars one day?”

He sighed. “Yes. But not today, OK?”

She pulled back, wrapped her arms around him. “Let me guess: not first-date material?” She grinned, hoping he’d get the reference. It was something he’d told her the day they’d kissed the first time.

He smiled, relaxed, sighed again, though this time it was soft, not one of frustration. “Yes. Exactly.”

“OK, fair enough. How about another first-datey question, then. Favorite movie?”

“Don’t have one. Haven’t really seen many movies, to be honest.”

“You’re kidding. You quoted *Princess Bride* to me the other day.”

He laughed, walked his hands backwards, sunk to his elbows, then dropped

down so he was lying flat again. “Because when we finally got a VHS player at County House, it was one of the only movies we had, and all the girls were in love with Cary Elwes, so they’d watch it over and over. Plus, it was one of the few films my roommate liked, mostly for the fighting scenes. I could probably interpret that movie in my sleep.”

“Well, it’s one of my favorites,” she said, climbing off and snuggling up beside him.

“And now you have your very own Westley? Should I say ‘As you wish?’” His tone was slightly sardonic.

“Can’t blame a girl for falling in love with golden hair and blue eyes.”

He turned his head, looking at her, incredulous.

She pushed up on her elbow so she was gazing down at him. “You really don’t think much of yourself, do you?”

“Please don’t tell me you’re dating me because I’m some crippled Cary Elwes fantasy,” he said on a sigh. “I need someone firmly in reality. I thought you understood that.” Kai pushed himself up, grabbed his wheelchair and pulled it closer. He planted his hands on the seat and levered his body off the ground and into the chair, pushed up until he was sitting all the way into it. She sat up onto her knees as she watched him place his feet on the footrest, his legs inert until he released them, at which point his left leg began to jump. It was subtle, like the way you might jiggle your knee when you’re restless. It meant he was stressed, or tired, or both.

“What happened to ‘nothing you can say will upset me?’”

Kai sighed heavily. “I’m sorry. You were trying to compliment me, and I . . .” He shook his head. “Instead of movies, I had books. Art used to let me borrow some. He was the only one who ever came to visit me.” Kai bent, snatched one of the blankets and started folding it.

Renee followed his lead, folding up the other blanket. She remembered her brief visit to County House, how much it had meant to Kai to make the holiday special for those kids, how their eyes had lit up when they’d seen the two of them arrive, the laughter and the joy from some store-bought treats and a few simple games. It put Kai’s statement, said flatly enough in his normal, nonchalant style, take on a much sadder air. Art had apparently been the only person in Kai’s life for how many years? Ten? Twelve? Who’d cared enough to go see him, to bring him “gifts.” Growing up in a huge family, Renee couldn’t even begin to imagine what that must have felt like.

“That’s why he was so ready to defend you.” It came out like a realization instead of a question.

Kai shrugged, pushed to the edge of the cleared area to get the bag he’d packed the blankets in. “My favorite is *Hamlet*. I know it’s a play, but I’ve never seen it.”

Renee stopped halfway through her folding. “You’re kidding.”

He shook his head, shoved the blanket in the duffel.

“Well, we’ll have to fix that and add a few movies to your repertoire in the process. Maybe second date?”

“Maybe.” He looped the strap over his head, then wheeled toward her, taking the other blanket. She saw that haunted look in his eyes, though he tried not to meet her gaze. “I also always liked *The Odyssey* and *Tom Jones*. And *Count of Monte Cristo*.”

“The classics.” Adventures. The kind of books a boy could read and live vicariously through, Renee realized. She helped him stuff the pillow into the bag and zip it shut. “I used to spend my summers pouring over art and architecture books I’d check out from the main public library. I’m a dork, I know.”

“You really did always know what you wanted to be, huh,” Kai observed in an indeterminate tone, noticing she was packing away their trash and Tupperware into the backpack Kai had brought with them, so he went around blowing out the candles that were still lit.

“And you didn’t?”

Kai let himself glide to a stop, his back to her. “As I said before, kids like me learn pretty quick dreaming is futile. It’s best to take things one day at a time.”

Renee approached, laying a hand on his shoulder.

He glanced back, carefully turning around in a smooth circle; she stepped out of his way.

“Have you ever been happy, Kai?”

He looked down, away. “I’ve had moments. A few I remember, with my brother, before our parents died. Some good times with my roommate or my high school friend. Some with Becca, in the beginning.” He shrugged. “Like everything in my life, happiness is relative.”

Renee lifted the strap over his head, setting the duffel aside, then climbed into his lap, sideways, her legs dangling off, her arms wrapped around his neck. “I want to make you happy, Kai. Really happy. Smiling that rare genuine smile of yours until your cheeks hurt.”

A shade of that smile slipped onto Kai’s face. “As you wish.”

November 8, 2000

Kai sat in the front row of his history class, in his wheelchair, struggling to remain calm, focusing on the touch of Renee's hand in his. She sat beside him in a rickety standalone desk as she had ever since they'd reconnected via her surprise PT visit. He'd insisted she didn't have to be uncomfortable or sit right in the front on his account, but she had simply smiled and said, "I'll sit on the floor, or in a chair without a desk, if that's what it takes to sit beside you." And so she had, at first, sitting in a regular chair, her legs folded up, using the surface of their textbook to write on, until the professor had requested a desk be brought in for her.

Today they got the results of their midterm; since the test was multiple choice and used a bubble sheet, it was scored by computer, so they didn't need to wait for their grades. Kai had dosed himself up with drugs to try to control his anxiety, but he felt that dizzy, detached feeling that sometimes preceded an attack, so he took slow breaths and tried to remind himself it was just a test. He'd survived far worse ordeals than history, after all.

"I'll admit, you guys impressed me," the teacher said to the crowd. He turned to face the board, drawing a large number 105. "That was the high score: perfect, plus the bonus questions. And the low." He turned back to the board, drawing a 22 on the opposite side. Kai reflexively squeezed Renee's hand tighter. If that was his score, there was no possible way he could recover from that and pass the semester. Then the professor drew a bell curve connecting each number, and at the peak, he drew 75. "But the class average was a solid 75, which is just right. Some of you did very well and showed some real improvement."

Next, the professor began calling out students' names one by one so each person could come forward and collect his or her scored answer sheet, along with a copy of the test, if they wanted to use it to see which questions they'd missed. Kai was grateful for his chosen last name—Fox—instead of his family name—Taylor—because it meant less stress waiting. At the same time, it also meant he'd either have to put off looking at the grade longer or spend more time in class agonizing over it if he did.

"K. Fox," the professor called, and Renee had to tap him on the shoulder to get him to snap back from his thoughts.

Kai pushed the short distance to the front table, accepting his bubble sheet from the teacher.

"I'd like to speak with you after class."

Kai swallowed, nodded, and snagged a copy of the test from the pile, shoving both papers between his legs and returning to his spot next to Renee.

She smiled at him encouragingly, but didn't speak; the professor's voice continued to drone out names.

Kai smoothed out the papers in his lap, debating about whether or not he should look now or later. Finally, he decided he'd rather know, and glanced at the computer's printed score.

71.

71!

71! Kai's heart raced. A C minus! A smile bloomed on his face until his happiness was hit with the hammer of realization. The professor had asked to see Kai after class. Did that mean he thought Kai had cheated? But how? Kai took the test in a

study room in the tutoring center, with a proctor. Though, granted, the woman had spent most of the time pretending to read a book while actually staring at Kai's spasming legs.

As if on cue, his knees began to bob asynchronously. Renee laid her hand on his, which he had secured his right thigh, as if that would somehow protect it, as ridiculous as the idea was.

Finally, the professor finished handing out the graded tests and flipped through a copy of the answer key. "I'm going to review some of the most commonly missed questions for the remainder of class, but I encourage you to go through your own exams at home as you prepare for the final, which, let me remind you, is only five weeks away." He cleared his throat. "The first most-missed question was number 10, which asked, 'Which century was affected by the Black Plague?' The correct answer was 'D: All of the above,' because while the fourteenth century certainly was most immediately affected, the repercussions of the Black Death went far beyond that. Some argue that even modern events, such as world wars, may not have occurred were it not for the devastation of the 1300s. It's one reason why it's so important to study history - the past can have significant ramifications on the future, even generations later."

Kai glanced over at Renee, who was, of course, taking notes on everything the professor was saying. He had to tell her about his FS, his transplant. Soon. It wasn't fair to her to take this relationship much farther without her knowing what she was getting herself into, and more than that, he didn't want to hide it from her. Pretending and hiding were exhausting; he wanted to be able to be open and honest and just himself with her.

She noticed him looking at her, dropped her pen and reached out for his hand, offering a sweet, gentle smile. He didn't want to lose her, which he might, once she realized how truly fucked up his body was, but it'd be better for them both to hurt now rather than later.

Renee had promised to wait for Kai outside until he'd finished talking to their teacher, agreeing to go back to his place to review the test together. Kai knew his hands were shaking subtly, and he tried to focus on happy thoughts and not the swirl of negative emotions that threatened to overwhelm him if he let them. He had a good grade on his midterm, and Renee only smiled like that, warm and sweet, for him. Whatever happened in the next few hours, he had to remember that, at least.

Finally, the professor gestured for Kai to come forward, taking a seat at the chair by the front table to keep them more at eye level. That made Kai's pulse spike—most people didn't worry about looking down at him when he was in the chair, so making the conscious decision to sit. . . . *Deep breath, Kai*, he tried to assure himself. Maybe the professor was just tired.

"I wanted to talk to you about your test," the professor said, once Kai was parked across from him.

Kai swallowed. If the teacher thought Kai cheated, did that mean he had to retake the test? Kai wasn't sure he could go through that again.

"It's all right," the professor said, as if noticing Kai's agitation. "I wanted to tell you good job on the exam. It's nice to see a student working hard and having his effort pay off."

Kai let loose a long, whooshing breath.

"This grade significantly bumps you up for the semester. Right now, you're

passing with a D minus average. We have one more regular test, a couple quizzes, and the final. As long as you pass all those, you'll be able to move on to the next semester." The professor smiled encouragingly. "Registration starts next week; sign up for my class. I have confidence that if you do whatever it was you did to prepare for the midterm, you should be fine. And if you have any major health issues that force you to miss class or anything like that, come talk to me and we'll work something out. All right?" He offered Kai his hand.

"Thank you, sir," Kai said, shaking.

"I only pretend to be a heartless bastard. Gotta keep the freshman scared, or they walk all over you," he said with a chuckle. "You're a good student, Kai. I look forward to seeing you again next year."

Kai rolled into the dining area, his backpack in his lap. He set it on the table, but quickly abandoned it when Renee leaned forward to kiss his ear, making him arch his shoulders into her touch. "Congrats on the test. I knew you could do it."

He turned around carefully, pulling her into his lap, caressing her in a way that was both hungry yet protective. His hands were so large on her small frame, and it amazed her how his touch, even when he wasn't specifically trying to arouse her, set her entire body alight. It was like he was trying to memorize her every curve and angle with his fingertips. Renee searched his eyes. They were impenetrable, disturbingly sad and distant, despite the way he was now rocking her into him, immediately making her breath come in panting gasps. They'd promised to go slow, and somehow, she knew he'd respect her if she asked him to stop, but she didn't want to. She only wanted to see that horrible fear and vacancy leave his eyes.

"Kai—" she started to say, but he silenced her protest with a kiss.

This kiss was unlike any they'd ever shared, epic in its depth and passion as Kai kissed her as if it were his last chance. It stretched for several minutes, barely allowing either of them breath, making Renee dizzy, though she didn't want it to end. He nipped at her lips and encouraged her to nip back, pressing her closer, and she could feel so much emotion in the way he gripped her and moved his tongue against hers, as if he had somehow distilled himself into an essence and were attempting to empty it into her. As if, through this kiss, even more than those in the past, he could tell her every one of his many secrets, the story of the past that often haunted those beautiful blue eyes, transferring his memories to her so that she would share them without forcing him to relive them.

And Renee wondered—as her heart beat painfully in her chest, her nipples aching hard and her body increasingly desperate to feel him inside her, a longing like she hadn't experienced since her early days with Jude—if what he'd started to tell her a few nights ago had anything to do with this. Especially as the kiss continued, still heated, yet somehow becoming more desperate, as if he would lose her as soon as it ended.

Renee finally pushed him away with a gentle hand on his shoulder. His eyes were reluctant to open, but when they did, that sadness still remained, though he tried to clear it with blinking. He stuttered out an apology through panting breaths, and Renee found herself wrapping her arms around him in a hug, her lips at his ear.

"Tell me what's wrong, Kai," she whispered.

He gently guided her back, then off his lap, looking up at her with a sigh. His face was blank, yet his eyes again gave him away, and she wasn't sure if he was trying to put up his neutral mask and failing. "We need to talk," he said in the toneless voice

Renee hated even more than the mask. Did he want to break up with her? Was that why he'd kissed her like he'd never do so again? Her heart sped up as her brain raced with explanations: it had only been a couple weeks since she'd walked in on him in PT, but everything had seemed good between them. Their date Sunday had been unique and perfect.

"OK," she forced herself to say in a calm voice.

He glanced back at the table, smoothing his hand anxiously on his thigh. "I need to stretch first. Could you . . . could you start going through the test? See which questions I missed so we can go over it later? My answer sheet and the questions should be in my book."

Renee let out a long breath, nodded. "Sure."

Kai smiled at her, tired, but not forced, before turning and disappearing into his bedroom.

Renee opened the main pocket of Kai's backpack. As neat as the apartment was, or even Kai's room, his bag was a perpetual disaster of crumpled papers mashed into books and notebooks. She shook her head as she extracted his history text, not surprised when a flutter of papers fell out of it.

Annoyed, she stooped to collect them, grateful Kai had given her a task, because waiting to hear what those dreaded three words in a relationship meant—*We need to talk*—were going to be agony. Kai usually needed to stretch in the afternoons, which she'd learned not long after they'd reconnected. But he never did it in her presence, and it usually took at least fifteen to thirty minutes. Maybe because he took off his clothes? Now that she thought about it, he did usually reemerge wearing something else, comfortable lounging clothes instead of the jeans and newer shirts he normally wore to class.

She found the bubble sheet from the midterm easily, but the test was more of a challenge. She paused when she noticed an essay: *Hubris: A Necessary Journey?* The heading on the front page clearly indicated it was for their English comp class, but Renee couldn't recall any assignment remotely close to the topic of arrogant pride. And as she heaved the packet in her hand, she realized it was long—much longer than their usual 2-5 page homework essays.

She was about to stuff it back in his bag with the rest of the miscellany when she happened to read the opening line: *Four-hundred, twenty-three days ago, a double-lung transplant saved my life.*

Renee's head popped up, shocked. *Double-lung transplant.* The words were still there when she looked again. And the number of days equated to more than a year ago. Memories started swirling back to her: Nancy, asking if it was too soon for Kai to be back at school. Art telling her Kai had "been through a lot." Kai talking about severe allergies but never quite admitting to asthma. And all those prescription bottles. The scars she'd seen glimpses of, but that he'd never talk about. The other day, when he'd begun to explain why he was only starting college now.

Renee didn't know much about medicine, but a transplant was a big deal. It meant he had to have been very sick. Possibly for a long time. She'd seen personal interest stories on the news before, with gaunt, desperate faces of people waiting for a new organ. Apparently, despite his promises to be more forthcoming, the paper in her hand made Renee realize how little she knew Kai.

Part of her thought she should ignore the essay, wait for Kai's return. Maybe this was what the "we need to talk" was about? But it hurt, a deep, burning in the center

of her chest that drove its way up to her eyes, tears wanting to spring from them, that Kai could write about this, that he could share such a significant part of his life with their *teacher*, and not with her.

So she kept reading.

Kai talked about the Greeks, about Odysseus and how he defied the gods and was punished, doomed to roam the seas for years before ever returning home, before ever getting to live the life he'd always dreamed of. Then Kai compared himself to Odysseus, talking a little about his own life, growing up an orphan, in a group home, sick all the time, and how he could relate to the ill-fated Greek king.

There are times in life where you feel abandoned by the gods, as if any achievements you make are solely the result of your own will. I'm not personally sure if there is a God or gods weaving the web of the universe; based on my experience, I'm inclined toward skepticism rather than miracles, ironic as one may find that. Perhaps the real lesson of the Odyssey isn't only about pride being man's downfall, but rather that sometimes, a man has to earn what he gets. Would Odysseus have been as grateful for his family, as proud of his son, if he'd returned immediately home after war?

I spent far too much of my younger childhood wondering what my life would have been like if I'd been "normal." If I hadn't been sick. Disabled. If I'd grown up with my parents and siblings like any other kid. Would something as simple as passing this class mean as much to me?

And there are moments when I wonder if I, like Odysseus, was never meant to "come home." The very act of transplantation is its own level of hubris, that man can look in the face of nature, much the way Odysseus did to Poseidon, and say, "No, not today." There are days, dark days, just as Odysseus had along his journey, when I think I may have been better giving in, not accepting the transplant, and letting someone else get their second chance. But then I remember how hard my brother fought for my life, that someone else chose to give part of themselves so that someone they didn't know, could never know, like me, could live. That somewhere else, there are others who, maybe, finally found their way to their own Ithacas, with a new heart or liver or kidney.

Renee's eyes filled as she read, seeing this intimate insight into Kai's psyche and experiences he hadn't yet revealed to her. His writing was so good, so genuine, without the usual pretence or masking he so often did in life by reflex. But she also cried for herself, for the hurt she felt at having to read about his life rather than hearing it from his own lips. Could she believe that he wanted her when he obviously didn't trust her enough to share such an important detail of his life?

It's trite, but my journey isn't quite over; in some ways, it's only begun these past eight months, as I'm suddenly faced with a world of strange and foreign possibilities. Like Odysseus finally coming home yet having to fight for his crown and his family, I too, must find my way in this new world. It isn't always easy, and I still often curse the gods—who doesn't?—but I'm alive. I can. Hubris got me here, just like Odysseus.

I just have to hope, when the final lines of my story are sung, that it will all have been worth it.

Renee was bawling as she finished the essay, skimming through the half page of comments their professor had left in red ink, praising Kai for his writing talent, for his hubris in comparing himself to Odysseus, and his courage for finally being honest in his

work.

A+++. This is one of the finest pieces of writing I have ever read in all my years of teaching freshman composition. I'm not encouraging you to purposefully skip class or assignments, but this is the piece that proves to me you've mastered this class and deserve an A. Come see me sometime as I'd like to discuss using this as a sample to encourage future students.

Renee was still crying, clutching the paper in her hands, when the creak of Kai's chair caught her by surprise. She looked up through her veil of tears, not caring whether he was mad at her for reading it.

His expression, unsurprisingly, was difficult to interpret, as was his tone. "I see you read my English comp makeup paper."

"How could you tell our professor all this, but not me?" Renee said in a quiet voice, not bothering to wipe away her tears.

Kai said nothing, his fingertips fidgeting on his rims, his head lowered, hiding his eyes.

"I told you the most secret thing about my life," Renee sobbed. "About Jude. And you couldn't tell me you almost *died* last year?" She tossed the pages at him, feeling sick, like Diane had been right all along, that Renee had put her trust in a man who used her and betrayed her.

He pushed closer, the paper crumpling under his wheels, stopping when their knees touched. He hesitated a moment, then pulled off his shirt.

His body was perfect from the waist up, even better than she'd imagined, long and lean, gently sculpted, his pale skin outlining the muscles beneath. But the perfection was marred by numerous scars—the prominent sternal scar, and more beneath his pecs, on his abdomen, and the one at his neck. A simple chain necklace with several dog tags rested against his chest, and as he breathed, they shifted, and she noticed the red caduceus. She'd never seen them in real life, but she'd spot the ads every time she went to the pharmacy. Medical alert jewelry, so paramedics would be aware of his condition immediately, even if he were unconscious. The thought made her stomach lurch. Even more than the scars, somehow the necklace made everything real: Kai had another person's lungs inside him now, and they were the only thing that had kept him alive the past year. The only reason she and he had even been able to meet.

"They split my sternum here," he said clinically, sliding his finger along the scar, "and also went in here, and here," he added, pointing to the scars beneath his pecs. "Tried to reconnect the nerves. This," he pointed to a faint scar on his abdomen, "was where my feeding tube was. And this," he said with a nervous intake of air, pointing to his neck, "is where I had a tube in my trachea that connected to a machine that kept me breathing."

Renee's anger melted, seeing the tension in those fantastic shoulders, the fear he didn't try to hide in his blue eyes. Suddenly, the haunted look, the kiss, of earlier all made sense. Kai was terrified—of what? That she would change her mind about them? Whatever the case, he held himself stiffly, like a child bracing himself for the belt. It made her stomach ache.

Renee reached out for him, pulling her fingers back when he reflexively shirked from her touch, but then forced himself to relax, nodding subtly to signal it was OK. She let herself explore him, touch his bare skin below the neck and above the wrist like he'd never let her before, till at last she reached the circular puckered scar just north of his clavicle.

“Does it hurt?” she asked, her fingers hesitating above it.
“No,” he said with a bob of his Adam’s apple. “It’s just . . . ugly. It freaks people out.”

Renee shook her head, delicately tracing the outline of the scar. “Not me. Nothing about you does. I thought you knew that already.”

Kai brought his hand up to her forearm, ghosting his own fingers along her skin. “I wanted to tell you so many times,” Kai said. “I tried. The other night.” He sighed. “But there’s never exactly a good moment to say, ‘Oh, hey, I almost died last year, but then I got some dead guy’s lungs, so I’m good.’”

Renee cupped his cheek. “Kai. You don’t have to do that with me.”

He laughed, but his eyes betrayed a wariness. “What?”

“Hide. Pretend.”

Kai breathed in and out a few times before finally meeting her eyes; his were open, deep blue, filled with that piercing sadness she saw far too often. “My life has taught me that whenever something good happens, something bad almost always follows. You make me happy, Re, and . . . that . . .” He swallowed, looked away. “Terrifies me.”

Renee sank into his lap, wrapped her arms around him, laying her head on his shoulder. “Did you think if you told me about this,” she said, guiding a finger along his sternal scar, “I would change my mind about you?”

Kai held her tighter against him, but didn’t respond.

“Is your brother coming home any time soon?”

Kai’s breath hitched a moment, as if surprised by her question. “Today’s his first full night off in days. He’s with Vicky.”

Renee nodded, kissed his neck, then climbed back off. “Come on,” she said, leading him to his room. “We’ll study later.”

Kai’s room looked the same as it had a few days earlier, though his bed was neatly unmade, the sheets folded down at the end and his pillow collection stacked off to the side, out of the way. She turned to face the door and saw him wheel in slowly, still shirtless, his face vacant. He paused in the middle of the room, as if waiting for her prompt. So Renee settled down on the edge of his bed, patting the space beside her.

Wordlessly, he approached, aligning his chair and quickly heaving his body out of it and onto the mattress. As he adjusted his position, she noticed his right leg was bobbing, but he ignored it. Renee took one of his hands, kissed his knuckles, then gave it a reassuring squeeze.

“So everything in the essay is true?”

Kai took a long, slow breath. Nodded.

The essay had told Kai’s history: a childhood spent struggling for air, the pneumonias that had ultimately destroyed his lungs, and his long journey toward where he was right now, sitting beside her, desperately trying to maintain his calm though she could see his emotions struggling to burst the seams.

“And the story about your 21st birthday?”

Kai lowered his eyes. Nodded.

In the essay, Kai had explained, *My 21st birthday was only six weeks before my transplant, but of course, at the time, none of us knew that. We all figured it would be my last. I spent most of my time either asleep or drugged those last few weeks, but my brother made sure I was awake for at least part of that day, trying his best to be*

cheerful for my sake. Whenever he visited me and I was conscious, he'd always remind me that "today could be the day," and how he managed to hide the fear and sadness from his eyes I know he had to have felt surprises me still. Perhaps that was the doctor in him.

He brought me a piece of cake—a real piece of cake, not one from the hospital cafeteria, because he knew how much I liked sweets, and I remember—though how, I'm not honestly sure, as most of the final days are a blur—how much that seemingly innocent dessert made me want to cry.

For my first few months with my tracheostomy—a tube in my neck, connected to a machine that helped me breathe—I was still strong enough and my lungs healthy enough I used a valve that enabled me to smell and taste food, so I could still swallow and speak. By about six months before my transplant, I could no longer tolerate the valve, even for short periods of time, because it made breathing so much harder. I tried a special kind of tube next, with holes in it that would at least let me have a limited sense of smell and some speech, but swallowing was difficult, and soon I got a feeding tube in my stomach and stopped eating by mouth entirely.

By June, my birth month, I couldn't get enough ventilation—a doctor's fancy way of saying the amount of oxygen getting into my lungs—with the special tube. So I had it replaced with a solid one that fit snug inside my trachea with a balloon. The less air that leaked from it, the more that got into my failing lungs, the more oxygen that made its way into my blood. But the change meant my sense of taste and smell were gone. Completely, since air didn't go up into my mouth and nose. I could also no longer speak. At all. For several weeks before my brother presented me with my birthday cake, I had been unable to smell, taste, or talk, and though I know he didn't make the gesture with malice, it felt that way.

Especially when we tried to adjust the balloon that held my tube in place just enough so I could smell, maybe even taste a tiny piece of my birthday treat, and I almost passed out from a lack of oxygen.

So it was more than the cake itself that had me battling tears that day—but what it represented. Like Odysseus's hope of seeing his home once more, tantalizingly close and yet impossibly far, something I believed I'd never experience again. That cake was my future, coming from a world outside the hospital, apart from doctors and nurses and never-ending days of waiting.

A future I couldn't take in. Couldn't taste. Couldn't smell. Couldn't experience. As unreal as a photograph, yet frustratingly material.

Even after our failed attempt to get me to taste and smell my cake, I refused to let myself break down in front of my brother. Who had sung me happy birthday anyway, and insisted I make a wish, even though we couldn't have candles and I couldn't have blown them out even if we had. How desperately he'd tried, as miserable and hopeless as it was, to make the day special for me.

While other guys celebrate their 21st getting drunk with their friends, I spent mine in a hospital bed, staring at a piece of cake, a sugary reminder of death.

"What did you wish for?"

Kai took in a harsh breath, shook his head. The obvious answer would have been to find a match and finally get a transplant, but if Kai didn't offer that reply, perhaps it meant his wish had been darker. Had Kai wished for death? The thought sent a chill through Renee's veins, but she did her best to nod and leave the topic alone for now.

Renee gave Kai a moment, finally squeezing his hand. “So your memory problems . . . ?”

Kai nodded. “Not enough oxygen to my brain,” he said, pointing to his head, trying to smile wryly, but failing. “All things considered, I’m lucky,” he said with a shrug. “And I used to be worse. I could hardly follow a conversation at first.” Kai picked at the sheets, his focus on his fingers instead of her. “It was really frustrating. Sometimes, I’d have to stop almost mid sentence, because it was like the thoughts disappeared as soon as I formed them. Like one of those people who stumbles through a joke but can’t remember the punch line.”

“Wow,” Renee said, smoothing his skin with her thumb. “It’s hardly noticeable now.”

Kai shrugged. “Part of my rehab after my transplant was cognitive. Plus, I’ve learned some tricks and can hide it most of the time. If I’m interrupted, though, there’s usually a good chance whatever I was going to say is gone forever.” His smile looked painful. “Though I’m sure you’ll see more of it the longer you’re with me.” His voice trailed off on those last few words.

“And the coughing? The other night.”

Kai inhaled. “Because of the transplant, my lungs don’t clear on their own very well, so I have to force myself to cough at least twice a day, to get all the gunk out.”

“But you’re OK now, right? Back on Ithaca, battle fought and won. Time to claim Penelope?” Renee offered her own grin.

Kai let out a short, sharp sound that could have been a laugh, but he covered his face with his hands and didn’t respond for a long time, breathing slow and deep into his palms, his head dipped. What had she said wrong? Renee wondered. She gave him some time, smoothing his shoulder until finally he inhaled sharply and let his hands fall away.

“These lungs are healthy, but I have to take medicine, on time, twice a day, every day, probably for the rest of my life, to prevent my immune system from attacking them. But . . .” Kai took in a breath. “That makes me more susceptible to getting sick with things normal people don’t need to worry about. I’ve been lucky, but . . . I really should wear a mask when I’m around a lot of people in a confined space, like class, and I haven’t . . . I haven’t been doing that.”

“Kai . . .”

“I’m already enough of a freak. And then I met you. . . .” He shook his head.

Renee tugged on Kai’s hand to make him look at her. “Kai, promise me you’ll protect yourself. I’ll wear a mask, too, if you want. In solidarity.” Renee felt a full, brilliant smile peel across her face, but it faded when Kai’s eyes blinked rapidly and he turned his head instead of returning the grin. What was she doing wrong?

“There’s more,” he said in a low, quiet voice, not meeting her eyes. “Even with the drugs, even if I’m careful, my body can still reject my lungs. I can still get sick. And if that happens . . . I’ll get very sick.” Kai extracted his hand from her touch so he could pull himself farther back on the bed, his back against the wall. His legs were jittering with minor spasms, and they resisted his attempts to bend them as he pulled them toward his chest, hugging them close. “I can’t tell you how long. . . .” Kai swallowed. “You can’t plan your future with someone like me, and I understand if this is all too much.”

“Oh, Kai,” she said, climbing onto her knees and walking closer to him. He wouldn’t meet her eyes, so she lifted his chin and kissed him, warm and wonderful, deep

and pure, and she felt a fire inside her ignite as it always did when she was with him. “Do you remember the fortune you got the other night, when you brought me back here for twenty questions?”

He sighed, a harsh, defeated sound, shook his head.

“It said, ‘The future is what you make it.’ The other day, when I spent the night here, I realized that things will be different. Maybe more difficult, being with you, but I don’t care. What good is easy if I’m not happy? And being with you makes me feel alive.”

She heard him swallow thickly. “I could die, Re,” he said in a voice so quiet she barely heard it.

“And so could I.”

That garnered a faint laugh, and he finally looked up at her, eyes glossy, pushing his legs down, straightening them in front of him. Who was he trying to protect? Her, or himself? “Even with the transplant, I sometimes have trouble breathing. I might have years, but I might not.” Kai’s breath hitched, and he pulled her into his lap, hugging her close, his head on her shoulder, lips near her ear. A way to hide his face, perhaps, though she heard the emotion in his voice. “I want you, Re. I’ve wanted you since the moment I saw you that first day of class. But if you can’t do this, if you don’t *want* to do this, I get it. Just tell me now, please? Because I couldn’t handle falling in love with you and losing you when what I’m talking about becomes more than just talk. I can’t . . . I can’t go through that again.”

Renee heard the “again” clearly, and her heart crumbled. There was a story here, one Kai had left out of his paper, perhaps involving his ex, but now wasn’t the time to probe him for it. Perhaps she’d weasel it out of Jon at some point. Renee tried to push him away, but he clung closely to her.

“I’m messed up, Re. So messed up,” he said, his voice small.

“It’s OK,” Renee said, pressing herself against him, smoothing his strong back, feeling the subtle jerk of his shoulders indicating he was crying, though he was trying desperately to hide it. God, his ex must have been horrible, Renee thought, doing her best to comfort him with her touch. “I told you. Messed up together. All right? I’m in this game as long as you want me.”

“Stay with me,” he said, his voice tiny, almost frightened. “Please.” He finally pulled away to look at her, his eyes rimmed with red, so terrified and lost and sad.

She nodded, smoothed his hair out of his face. “I’m not going anywhere.” She kissed him lightly on his lips, tasting salt, then offered him a smile, held his chin to ensure he wouldn’t hide again. “I’m a big girl, too, OK? There’s almost nothing you can tell me that will make me think less of you. I don’t want you to be afraid of being honest with me.”

He cracked a smile then. “You stealing my lines, now?”

“I know I’m little, and I look delicate, but I’m strong. Let me be strong for you, OK?”

Kai nodded.

Renee pulled off her own shirt, hesitated a moment, but left her bra in place, not quite ready to be that naked with Kai yet. She brought his hands to her ribs, where they moved slowly, reverently, before he pulled her close for another kiss. This one was sweet, slow, tender, making time stutter and stall. She wondered if Kai had intended her to find and read his makeup essay, because clearly, more than any other revelation he’d shared with her, the truth about his scars was the hardest piece for him to share.

Finally, he pulled away, smiling faintly, some of the darkness faded from his

eyes. He lightly teased her breasts, fingers grazing over her nipples, making her gasp, before easily lifting her off his lap and setting her aside. Confused at first, she saw him push himself onto his side, lying down, arranging his legs and beckoning her into his arms. She snagged a blanket to cover them, snuggling beside him.

They held each other like this for a long while, Renee's forehead resting against his chest, and she found her ears tuning to the sound of his breath, slow, regular, just a tad noisier than her own, if she really focused on hearing the nuances. She could still feel the subtle twitch of his legs, but he was calmer, more relaxed, and she hoped she had helped his tension seep away.

"You know, when Jude . . . did . . . what he did . . . to me, I didn't leave him right away. I . . ." Renee sucked in a breath. "I thought, at first, he was right, when he told me I was a cock tease, and that I owed him, and that I couldn't have sex with him for months and then change my mind." Renee laughed. "I can't believe I'm half naked with a man, telling him this."

Kai's hand slid along her side, finally resting at her waist, his touch almost reverential. "I get it." She felt him take in a deep breath. "My ex abandoned me when I was dying," he said in a level, but low voice. "I still waffle between knowing she's a bitch and thinking it was my own fault. I hate my scars, especially this one," he said, bringing her fingers to his throat, where she felt the unnatural indentation, "because they make me think of her, of how stupid I was. Of the look on her face when she finally showed up, weeks after my transplant, and saw this scar."

Renee kissed his chest. "I never thought I'd find a man who could understand what happened between me and Jude. Why I stayed with him, why I didn't say anything." She smiled. "You were totally worth the wait."

Jon was looking at his first couple days off in nearly two weeks of mostly night shifts, making up for the time he took off to be with Kai, and he was eager to spend them—preferably naked—in bed with Vicky. Jon hadn't felt this horny since he was a teenager; with his shit schedule lately, they hadn't seen each other outside work in ten days, and it had been over a week since Vicky had snuck him a quickie in his office while he was on break. Jon was more than willing to put aside sleep and food to fuck her again.

Vicky opened the door, and before she could get a word out, he grabbed her, burying his tongue down her throat, shutting the door with a kick of his foot, then pressing her up against it. He shimmied out of his coat, tossing it aside, kissing her hungrily, one hand immediately fondling her breast, the other caressing her hip as he ground against her. She gasped and sighed and leaned into him, but when he reached to unbutton her jeans she pushed him away.

"We need to talk."

Words no man ever wants to hear from his woman, especially when he's so hard it hurts. They'd made up after the mini fight Saturday morning; she wasn't still angry about that, was she? She knew he could be clueless sometimes. Was she mad because they hadn't seen each other much lately? "Vic, I won't be on this horrible schedule forever. Just another week, and then I'm back to my usual. And I'm on-call for Thanksgiving, but I don't have to be on-site—"

Vicky turned her back to him, crossed to her living room. "That's not what this is about, Jon."

Jon pulled his fingers through his hair as he slowly followed her. As his erection faded, his exhaustion surged. Less than two months together, and she had

already apparently decided they were a mistake. He sank into the couch opposite her, trying and failing to read her face.

“Why did you go into peds?”

Certainly not the next thing he’d expected to come out of her mouth. “What?”

“You could have done just three years, specialized in adult pulmonology.

Instead, you came here, did five, so you could treat children, too. Why?”

Jon shook his head, rubbed his eyes. He was too tired for games and couldn’t follow Vicky’s logic, so he answered truthfully. “I knew I was interested primarily in cystic fibrosis and severe asthma, both of which largely affect children.” He shrugged, hoping Vicky would reveal what she was obviously fishing for.

“So it was academic.”

Jon pulled at his hair, sighing loudly. “Vic, what is this about?”

“Just tell me.”

“Why does it matter?”

“Because I need to know.”

Jon grit his teeth. “You know why.”

Vicky stared him down. “I need to hear you say it.”

“Because I thought my brother had died of an asthma attack when he was six-years-old. Because I couldn’t do anything for him. I spent more than a decade thinking about that moment, about how I should have been able to do *something*. *Someone* should have been able to do something. Because no child should die that way.”

Vicky folded her arms tightly across her chest, shaking her head. But when she spoke, her voice was flat. “It’s always about Kai.”

Maybe it was Jon’s exhaustion or sexual frustration, but he let his anger explode out. “When we were kids, I took care of Kai most of the time, because our mom was . . . unavailable, and our dad was working.” Jon jabbed his chest with a finger with each punctuated “I” as he spoke. “*I* was the one who stayed up with him nights when he couldn’t breathe. *I* was the one who taught him to sign and helped him to walk. *I* held him when he cried, when he was hurting or scared. *I* sat with him in the hospital whenever I could.” Jon rose, paced restlessly. “So yes. It started out about Kai, but it became more than that, because, as I remember you telling me, I understand what those parents are going through. And if I can make life better for them and their children, then I will.” Jon faced her, his own arms folded tightly on his chest. “What the fuck is this all about, anyway, Vicky? If you don’t want to see me anymore, fine, but don’t you fucking question why I do what I do.”

Vicky stared at him a long moment, her face unreadable, before finally rising so they were more at eye level. “I’m pregnant, Jon,” she said in a low voice.

Jon felt his knees start to buckle and he had to quickly adjust his feet so that he sank back into the sofa instead of the floor. “What? How?”

Vicky joined him, sitting a little closer, her knees touching his. “If you don’t know how, then I think you need your medical license revoked.” It was a joke, but she didn’t smile.

Jon swallowed, all of his anger having completely evaporated. “You’re . . . sure?”

Vicky nodded. “My OB-GYN says I’m about seven weeks.”

Jon shifted, pulled Vicky toward him. She turned so her back was to his chest, her head reclined against his shoulder, cradling his arms around her.

“Jon . . . I’m bringing this pregnancy to term. But if you don’t want to do this

with me, I'll look into adop—”

“No,” Jon said firmly, squeezing her wrists. “No, I’m in this with you.” He kissed the top of her head. “I’m not sure I’m ready for a little white chapel, but. . . . A baby.” He smiled against the top of her head. “I’ll do this with you, Vic. If you want it.”

She nodded. “I do.” She dipped her head back so she could attempt to look up at him. “Jon, I’ve wanted more than a friendship with you for years, but you were with Jenny, and then Kai got sick. . . . It was never the right time.”

Jon thought about it for a moment, squeezed her tight. Jon had always thought Vicky was unattainable, partially because of their age difference, and these past few weeks made him realize more than ever how much of a mistake Jenny had been. “Me too.”

“Just promise me,” Vicky said, pulling away, turning again to face him.

“Anything.”

She laid a hand on one shoulder. “You’ll put our child first. Kai’s an adult; he doesn’t need a father. But our baby does.”

Jon smiled faintly, nodded. He gently cradled her cheeks and pulled her closer, kissing her deep, passionately, but tender. “Kai will always be important to me,” Jon said, staring into her eyes to show his sincerity, “but you and this baby. . . .” He sighed softly, laid his hand on Vicky’s stomach. “Number one priority.” They smiled together, touched foreheads, and though the prospect of being a father was frightening, it also made him feel warm and light inside.

November 11, 2000

Diane opened the door, taking in the man in the wheelchair sitting in front of her. He was shockingly handsome, with a defined jaw and long, sloping nose, brilliant blue eyes and golden hair that fell loosely about his face, cascading over his ears.

“You must be Diane.”

She nodded, stepped aside so he could come in.

The door was a tight fit for his chair, so he pulled himself in with his hands on the doorframe.

“And you must be the infamous Kai,” Diane said, closing and locking the door behind him.

“Uh oh. Now I wonder what Renee’s been telling you about me,” he said as he slipped out of his coat, flashing a smile that would weaken the knees of nearly any woman.

Diane laughed, taking his jacket and hanging it up for him. He wore a long-sleeved T-shirt beneath a regular one that, though loose, couldn’t hide what had to be incredible arms and shoulders.

“Renee had to run to the store to pick up a few things last minute, but she should be back soon. Can I get you anything?”

“I’m good, thanks.”

Diane stood awkwardly, patting her thigh absently, looking around as if thinking what to say, trying to avoid staring at his wheelchair or his legs. Despite the wheels, he was incredibly attractive; she’d give Renee that. But even though Renee had sat Diane down and explained the essentials of the “complicated” Kai Fox, so Diane would know what to expect and potentially get on board with it, now that he was sitting in front of her, she wasn’t sure what to say or do. Diane had never known a disabled person before, and now suddenly her best friend was dating one. And Diane’s personality already came off as a bit . . . Diane would say “honest,” but most people might say “abrasive.” It’s one reason she and Renee made such a good pair: Renee’s sweetness balanced out Diane’s acerbic personality, whereas Diane’s assertiveness balanced Renee’s occasional timidity.

“So . . .” Diane said, bouncing on her knees a little, restless. Then she noticed one of his legs was spasming mildly, and remembered Renee had explained about that and decided maybe she didn’t want to make him seem self conscious, so she stopped. God. She was over thinking, like Renee, which Diane never did, and this wasn’t even her own boyfriend. But he was the first man that Renee had expressed a real, healthy interest in—well, if you could count weeks of desperate failed stalking until they finally rekindled “healthy.” Unless he sent Diane’s “asshole alarm” blaring, she didn’t want to do anything to jeopardize what could be a good relationship for Renee, even if Diane couldn’t understand the whole disabled part of the equation.

“So . . .” he echoed her. Was he smiling? Did he find her uncharacteristic uncertainty amusing? Who knew what Renee had told him. “Do you want to sit?”

His question caught her by surprise. Was it rude for her to stand when he was sitting? Renee hadn’t said anything about that, but then, Renee was so short, it probably didn’t matter much. Dammit. More over thinking.

He laughed now, low and rich. “Just thought you might want to be more comfortable while we wait for Renee?”

Diane nodded and led the way toward the section of the main room where they had a pair of couches and their small TV and VCR. She walked around the coffee table and sunk into her favorite spot. She'd already settled in when she realized his wheelchair couldn't fit between the table and the sofas. *Shit.*

"Oh. Sorry—"

"It's fine," he said with a smile, pulling up to the edge of the plush carpet that defined the space. "I'll move the table later."

Though she'd already observed his upper body seemed fit and strong, the statement still seemed jarring. She took a breath.

"You're a visual art major?" His right foot was spasming more visually now, jittering like he'd had too much coffee, although Renee had explained it was completely involuntary. He pressed his hand on his knee, but otherwise ignored it, so she did her best to do so as well.

"Yup. I started off in architecture but didn't last," Diane said with a laugh. "I dabble in all mediums and forms but I really like sculpture, especially working with metal." She relaxed a little, and then shifted in her seat. "Your wheelchair has some nice lines to it. And I could probably paint it for you, if you wanted. The frame, I mean."

He glanced down, seemingly out of reflex, and when he looked back up, she caught a flash of embarrassment before he hid it.

"Sorry," Diane said, though she wasn't really. "Renee didn't warn you about my foot and mouth disease?"

He shook his head, smiling. "It's fine. Somehow, though, I get a feeling you weren't hoping to get me alone so we could talk about metallurgy." His muscle spasms had quieted, so he used his hands to push his body up, adjusting his weight. "Ask or say anything you want."

There was one question she had, which she'd attempted to broach with Renee but never managed to actually ask. It wasn't exactly the most PC thing to say, but he seemed to be inviting her to speak freely. "So . . . Renee told me a little about . . . you," she said delicately, but her gaze settled on his legs and the look in his eyes told her he caught her meaning. "But it's just your legs . . . that don't work, right?" She raised her eyebrows.

He was leaned back, looking at her, his lips pursed, obviously holding back a smile, but he said nothing. Evidently, he knew where this was going and wasn't going to make it easier for her.

"I know it's none of my business, but Renee's had problems with guys taking . . . advantage . . . of her before. I know she likes you, but I'd get if she picked you because —"

Kai held up a hand and Diane worried that she'd stepped in it. "Yes, my plumbing works, and yes, I know about Jude. Renee told me, but that's not why she's dating me."

Diane felt her own blush this time. "Wait. Renee told you about Jude? About—"

Kai's smile faded to clenched teeth. "How he raped her?" His eyes flashed with anger. He took a deep breath, blinked, relaxed. "That's why I told her it's OK to take things slow, if that's what she needs."

"Really?"

"Really."

"I'm sorry," Diane said, sincerely this time. "It's just . . . Renee's dated some real users, and the way you always seemed to pull these disappearing acts, I just—"

“It’s fine. You’re looking out for your friend. Renee’s lucky to have someone like you.” Kai shifted his weight again.

Diane shrugged. “I think I’m more lucky to have her keeping me out of trouble.”

Kai laughed. God, was it possible he was actually a really nice guy? And Renee must trust him if she told him about Jude. Only a handful of people knew that secret.

The front door opening interrupted their conversation, Renee popping her head in, carrying several sacks of groceries. “I’m back!”

Kai was at her side before Diane had even stood up. “Anything else in the car?”

“Nope, this is everything. Just some snacks and the movies,” Renee said, smiling as Kai accepted most of the bags, carefully arranging them in his lap so they wouldn’t fall and following her to the kitchen.

He was going to help her put the groceries away? Diane could hardly believe her eyes. The last guy Renee dated would come over, crash on the couch, putting his dirty shoes everywhere, leave his beer bottles all over for Renee to clean up, and usually eat Diane’s food. Renee, God bless her, would always offer to pay Diane to make up for it, but Diane was grateful that relationship—if she could even call it that—hadn’t lasted.

Diane started for the kitchen, hesitating in the doorway, watching Renee and Kai interact as they worked together to put away Renee’s purchases, smiling and flirting and laughing and *happy*. Diane saw the way they looked at each other: it was nauseatingly Hallmark-greeting-card sappy, but Diane was relieved. Renee deserved someone who genuinely cared about her—and Kai’s reaction when Jude had come up in the conversation indicated he did—and who would treat her right. Diane didn’t think she could deal with the wheelchair, but if it didn’t bother Renee, then more power to her, right?

Diane cleared her throat when it was clear they were too lost in each other to notice her standing there. “Uh, I’m going to head out. You two have fun.”

Kai used the edge of the cabinet to help him turn around in the tight space. “Oh, Diane, I don’t want to kick you out—”

She held up her hand, snagged her purse from the opposite counter. “I have a sculpture project due soon anyway; the studio should be empty. Perfect time to get some work done.” She smiled and waved. She seemed to remember Renee mentioning a brother. Might be worth investigating. “Don’t wait up for me,” she added with a wink before heading out the door.

“Thanks for the Gatorade,” Kai said, snagging a bottle, twisting off the cap and taking a long drink. “But you didn’t have to.”

Renee shrugged, leaned forward and stole a quick peck. “I wanted to. Do you eat popcorn?”

“I’ll eat some if you make some, but you don’t need to worry about me.”

“You’re so easy,” Renee said, opening one of the boxes she’d brought, extracting a bag, and sticking it in the microwave.

Kai laughed. “I make up for it with being complicated in just about every other sense.”

Renee pulled herself up on the counter so she was sitting on it, then popped open a cabinet and fished out a large plastic bowl.

Kai couldn’t help nasty thoughts of what he could do to her, sitting on the counter while he was in his chair, but he quickly pushed them aside, accepting the bowl

and helping her down.

“So what did you and Diane talk about while I was gone?” Renee took back the bowl and set it aside. “I made her promise not to embarrass me.”

“Nothing,” Kai said, taking another sip of his drink. “We just chit chatted.”

“Uh huh. What’d she say?”

Kai shrugged, shook his head.

Renee dropped a shoulder. “Oh God, she asked if your dick works, didn’t she?”

Kai laughed. “She may have.”

Renee turned scarlet. “Oh God. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s fine, Re. She just wanted to make sure my intentions were good.”

Renee nibbled her lower lip and traced a line along his jaw with a single finger, making his cock immediately spring to attention.

“Not if you keep doing that,” he said, only half joking.

She grinned, took the Gatorade from him and set it on the counter. Then she climbed in his lap and kissed him, deep, probing, intense, making him smile and moan into her mouth, gripping her closer, desperate to feel her against him, flesh to flesh. He hadn’t had sex in over two months, and now that Renee knew about his transplant, he had nothing—physical anyway—to hide from her anymore. Still, they’d only been officially together a couple weeks, and ripping her clothes off and eating her out in the kitchen followed by her fucking him in his chair wasn’t exactly “taking things slow.”

The sound of popcorn popping began to fade, and the microwave beeped, but she continued to kiss him, ignoring it, gripping his shoulders and making him crazy.

“Ow.” Renee pulled away, looked down. Kai’s right knee was jumping.

Fuck, not now. “Sorry. . . .” His leg and foot had spasmed a little earlier, but then calmed, and he’d hoped he’d have a peaceful night, other than his tight back.

Renee used his shoulders to support herself as she climbed off. Her cheeks were delightfully flushed, and the neckline of her sweater had dipped over her shoulder, exposing her pale skin that Kai desperately wanted to lick and nibble as he moved his way lower. Not jacking off before coming over was apparently a *huge* mistake. And now his foot was spasming again, too. Nothing really painful, just annoying. He placed a hand on his knee, to try to make it less obvious, and also to try to keep his thigh from moving too much. He was making good progress with his recovery, and he didn’t want to set things back, even if these spasms weren’t particularly violent.

Renee hadn’t commented, emptying the popcorn into the bowl but keeping an eye on him in her peripheral vision. Finally, she said, “Can—can I do anything?”

He smiled faintly. “It’ll either pass in a minute, or get worse. I’m sorry if I hurt you.”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “You surprised me more than anything.”

“Let’s go sit,” he said.

“Not yet,” she said, suddenly, leaving the popcorn in the kitchen. “We should see if you fit in my bathroom before we get too cozy, right?”

“It’s fine, Re. I’ll figure something out. Good thing about drinking so much Gatorade is the bottles really come in handy. I always keep a few with me.” He cringed. “Sorry. Too much information.”

Renee just shook her head. “Try it for me?” She tucked her shoulders up, toeing the ground with her foot, and there was probably nothing she could have asked of him in that moment that he wouldn’t have said ‘yes’ to.

He nodded with a slight smile and followed her; if her bathroom was anything

like Jon's, there was no way he'd fit, but Renee was new to life with someone in a chair, and some lessons had to be learned by seeing how he literally could not fit in most small bathrooms.

The first thing Kai noticed was instead of having a traditional door, the room had two smaller ones that pulled open and laid flat against the wall, giving him the full width of the frame to enter, with no huge awkward door to work around. It could have been his imagination, but they smelled freshly painted. The second was that the bathroom, though small, was oriented in a way that he could actually fit inside; the bathtub/shower on his left, perpendicular to the door, which determined the depth of the room, a small sink in front of him, and off to his right, the toilet.

Kai blinked. It wasn't offset, but it wasn't the typical low, residential commode like Jon had in his bathroom, but one more like Kai's, high, easier to transfer to. And grab bars had been installed along the wall. Kai pushed closer; it wouldn't be as simple to use as what he had at home, but it was far better than passable. Without a word, he drifted over to the shower—now he realized the bathmats that Renee must normally have had on the floor had been removed and lay draped over the tub—and pulled back the curtain.

A shower seat identical to his own was set in the tub, though pushed a bit farther back, and the shower head had been converted to a hand wand, with a base for it at the usual height, as well as a bit lower. Kai felt his heart beating faster in his chest, and he wasn't sure if it were a sign of an impending panic attack or a surge of excitement that everything Renee had promised him a few days ago—*"I'm in this game as long as you want me"*—was more than mere words.

Carefully, he turned around in the tight space; Renee stood in the doorway, anxiously awaiting his reaction. "It's a bit early, but . . . Merry Christmas."

Kai found it a struggle to find words, or even signs, to respond. *"I don't know . . . what to say."* Nikki had never made any accommodations for him, and though Becca had, like everything with her, they came with strings. Heavy strings.

Renee smiled shyly. "After I spent the night at your place, I started thinking, and. . . ." She shrugged, toed the floor some more. "I want you to be comfortable here. I'm serious about us, and I have three-plus years of school left, and Diane and I really love this apartment. . . ."

Kai glided closer, reaching up for one hand. "Thank you," he said, not able to say more; there was no way he could convey in English what this gesture meant to him, in more than practical terms, and Renee's ASL wasn't remotely good enough. "But . . . how? You stayed at our place only a week ago."

Renee grinned now, a confident, elated smile. "I talked to Troy, who put me in touch with the occupational therapist people, who advised me on what to do, and Diane helped me convince our landlord. She can be very persuasive when she needs to be."

Kai felt an easy, relaxed smile slip onto his face. "Can I borrow her? I've been trying to get ours to put in a roll-under sink for months."

Renee laughed. God, she was so beautiful when she looked at him like that it made his chest hurt. "So you like it?"

He nodded.

"I know we're taking things slow, but this way, if you need to spend the night. . . ." Her eyes twinkled.

Kai pulled his hands along Renee's sides, sliding his thumbs under the hem of her sweater, teasing her bare skin. She didn't stop him, so he continued, working his way

under her shirt to her breasts, searching out her nipples to tease. Kai caressed her for several minutes, growing achingly hard again, pressing teasing kisses punctuated by playful licks on her belly, a taste of what else she could have if she'd let him.

"We could try out the shower," he said. "I'll make it worth your while."

She sighed, her eyes fell closed for a moment as he continued to fondle her breasts, fingertips circling taunt nipples, and he hoped she'd say yes. Maybe he'd even feel her hands on his cock, stroking him. . . .

But Renee pushed his arms away and stepped back, out of the bathroom. Her face was still flushed from passion, but her eyes betrayed her. She was scared. "I want to . . ." she said, almost apologetically. "But . . . I can't. I'm sorry." She pulled her sweater down, covering herself as much as possible. "On the couch or even in the bed it'd be one thing. . . . But in the bathroom . . . I'd feel . . . trapped." Renee bit her lip. "I know it doesn't make any sense. . . ."

"I understand, Re," Kai said. *More than you'll ever know*, he thought. "I shouldn't have pushed you. We agreed to slow. Let's watch the movies." He offered her a smile, but though she nodded, she still seemed shell shocked.

Kai followed her out to the living room, surprised to find the coffee table had been moved, pushed against the wall beside the TV, giving him space to get to either couch, if he wanted. He shook his head. Diane must have done it before she left, while he was too busy drooling over Renee in the kitchen. Part of him was grateful; the table was long and probably heavy, and had been sitting on a plush rug, which would have made moving it from his chair complicated and time consuming. Especially since his back was acting up.

Renee's apartment was relatively accessible, the floor of the main room and kitchen not too dissimilar to that in his own apartment, but the furniture wasn't arranged with a wheelchair in mind, several thick rugs like this one placed around the floor.

He leaned down to roll up the rug enough he didn't have to fight with it to get to the couch, transferring to the one facing the TV. He noticed Renee moved quietly, her cheerful mood evaporated, and it felt eerily like looking in some kind of distorted mirror. Is this what Renee experienced so many times when he'd withdrawn reflexively inside himself as memories of the past surfaced to haunt him?

She seemed to be struggling with getting the VCR to accept the tape, cursing to herself in frustration.

"Re, come here. Forget about that for now. I think we should talk."

She obeyed, rising and joining him on the couch. "I'm sorry," she said in a thick but small voice. "I've ruined everything, haven't I?"

"Of course not," Kai said, taking her tiny hand and cradling it in one of his.

"I trust you," she said, though she wouldn't look up. "But what if we start something, and the 'devil gets in you' as my maw maw would say, and you can't stop yourself?"

Kai grit his teeth, darkness swirling in his eyes, but he swallowed it down; he didn't want Renee to think his anger was directed at her. "Re," he said, giving her hand a gentle tug to try to get her to look at him. "Do I want you? Yes. Do you make me horny as fuck? Yes. Would I hesitate a minute, if you said you wanted to have sex with me, to kiss and lick and touch every square inch of your body before slipping inside you until we both came? No." Kai ducked to try to look up and find her eyes, hidden among the shadows cast by her cascading curls. "But will I ever do anything you don't want me to

do? No. You can always tell me to stop. Whether we're fully dressed or halfway through the full act. You have a right to change your mind. Always." He tried to tug on her again to get her to look up, but she pulled away. "Re, please look at me."

Finally, after several minutes, she did. She wasn't crying, but her eyes were glossy and rimmed with red.

"I'll be frustrated, of course I will be," Kai said, trying to smile to reassure her. "But nothing a few minutes in that adapted bathroom of yours can't fix." He tucked a curl behind her ear. "I will never be angry because you decide you're not ready." He opened his arms, hoping she'd accept a hug.

After a moment of hesitation, she did, but he soon felt her crying into his shoulder, her small body jerking against his larger one, loud sobs that racked her petite frame.

"Was I too Deafie just now? Too blunt?"

"No," Renee mumbled, but she didn't say more, continuing to weep in his arms.

Kai held her, surprised by how much it hurt, a physical ache he couldn't localize, to hear and feel her crying and not know how to fix it, how to make it better for her.

Finally, Renee pulled back, wiped her eyes with the side of her hand. "I'm sorry," she said. "I'm not usually like this."

Kai shook his head and swept a few stray tears away with the pad of his thumb. "No consequences for telling me to stop. I promise." He smiled. "Like I said, I might be frustrated, but that sort of comes with the territory of having a Y chromosome."

That finally made her crack a smile.

"Why don't you go get the popcorn and our drinks from the kitchen, and I'll get the movie started. You can pretend every character who dies is Jude, especially if it's painful." He smiled, hoping that would cheer her up.

She laughed faintly, and her eyes softened. She smoothed her hand along his hair, finally bringing him close into a short kiss. "Thank you," she murmured. When she pulled back, she looked like she was ready to cry again, but she shook her head, perhaps in response to his worried look. "I'll be OK. You'll hold me and we'll laugh at Mel Gibson and I'll be fine."

Kai nodded, watched her leave, and knew that if he ever met this Jude, he'd kill him for making the beautiful ray of sunshine that was Renee—his nickname for her so fitting—darken the way it just had. No, killing him would be too kind. Castration, perhaps, Kai thought evilly. And in his chair, he was at the perfect height, too.

Vicky sat at the kitchen island of her childhood home, watching her mother, Margaret, roll out yet another sheet of sugar cookie dough.

"Ma, isn't it a little early for Christmas cookies? It's not even Thanksgiving yet."

"Bah. It's never too early for sugar snowmen." Her mom grabbed her cookie cutters and expertly went to work, turning the blank dough into dozens of tiny snowmen, snowflakes, and other holiday shapes in minutes.

"So, Ma," Vicky said a little hesitantly, spraying Pam on a couple cookie sheets, "remember I told you I was seeing someone? That I might bring him to Thanksgiving dinner?"

"Mmm," Margaret muttered, nodding a thank you as she began laying the cookies out on each tray. "The doctor, right? Dr. Tyler?"

"Taylor, Ma."

“Same difference. Get the oven, will you?”

Vicky sighed and rose, pulling open the oven Margaret had indicated so her mother could shove the cookies inside. Her mom’s kitchen had four ovens—two sets of doubles—which might have been overkill in a normal home, but with eight children and legions of other relatives, all four were well used.

Before sitting back down, Vicky went to the fridge for a beer. From the way this conversation was going already, she was going to need it. She had one in her hand when she heard her mother.

“Your father will wonder why he only has five beers left instead of six,” Margaret noted, cleaning her workspace so she could roll out still more dough.

Vicky blinked, the fridge still open, as she realized, *Shit. Can’t drink while I’m pregnant.* Reluctantly, she replaced the beer and grabbed some juice instead, probably stocked for the numerous grandkids who shuffled in and out of the house. “You’re right,” Vicky said as she returned to her seat.

Margaret stared at her suspiciously for a moment, probably wondering why Vicky backed down so easily, though she said nothing.

“His name is Jon, and we’re serious.”

“Are you sure it’s a good idea to date someone you work with? Remember . . . oh, what was his name . . . Todd?”

“Terry. And that was nursing school. I was still getting over. . . . Anyway, this is different.”

“Do you think I should do three turkeys this year, or two turkeys and a ham? Or maybe just the breast. I was reading in a magazine the dark meat really isn’t good for you, and your father—”

“Ma. I’m trying to talk to you.”

“I’m listening.” She searched through a few drawers before pulling out some more cookie cutters, these more fall themed. “See, not too early for these, I hope,” Margaret said, as if trying to prove her earlier point. “Maybe I should do two turkeys and two hams. Everyone seems to prefer the ham leftovers.”

Vicky sighed. “Jon is diabetic, OK? So he’s not going to be eating too many starches or carbs or sweets.”

Margaret nodded, though by the way she seemed distracted by her task, Vicky figured it had nothing to do with what she just said.

“I’m telling you this so you’re not offended when he doesn’t eat much or drink any alcohol. His blood sugar can be hard to regulate sometimes.”

Margaret looked at Vicky with a sour frown. “You and your sister Victoria—”

“I’m Victoria, Ma.”

Margaret rolled her eyes, wiped her hands and started setting up cooling racks. “Victoria, Veronica, whatever. You two are always talking down to me. Just because I didn’t go to college and stayed home with you kids, you think I don’t know anything about the world.” She slipped on a pair of oven mitts, pulling out finished cookies. “I’ll tell you something,” Margaret said, pointing a spatula at her daughter, “I’ve learned more about life from raising eight children than anyone could teach you in school. Which you might know if you were a mother.” It was a low blow, and even Margaret seemed to realize it. “Vicky—”

Vicky blinked furiously, took a few deep breaths. It would be so easy to just tell her mom the truth, but she knew all too well the truth didn’t always set you fucking free. So instead, Vicky smiled, shook her head, dismissing it.

Margaret frowned, but seemed to accept the easy out, continuing as if the slip hadn't happened. "Anyway, I know all about that. Vincent's oldest, Emily, was just diagnosed. Poor thing. Has to prick her finger all the time and take these horrible shots several times a day."

"It's not that bad, Ma. Jon's been a type I diabetic since he was seven."

"He'll be fine," Margaret continued, as if Vicky hadn't spoken, scooping cookies onto the cooling racks. "I'm making a sugar-free version of everything anyway since Valerie is on a diet. Or is it Vivian?" Margaret waved a hand in the air. "Bah. Doesn't matter; one of you girls is always dieting anyway."

Vicky sighed. It was obvious her point wasn't getting across no matter what she said. "Jon and I are serious, Ma," Vicky repeated. "And he's not used to a big family, so . . . just . . . be nice to him, OK?"

"I'm always nice," Margaret said, scooping more cookies onto baking sheets. "Bring him some of these when I'm done. You can take some undecorated ones so they don't have as much sugar."

Vicky had to resist a full facepalm.

Kai was hurting. Renee could tell, even though he didn't complain. He shifted his weight every ten minutes it seemed, occasionally linking his hands and stretching his long arms above or in front of him, like his back was tight. They had struggled at first to find a position that was comfortable for both of them, especially since Kai didn't want Renee lying on his legs for too long, since he was still having mild spasms, and he needed something to support his back. Finally, they'd settled for Kai sitting with his legs out, feet propped on the seat of his wheelchair, Renee leaning against him, his arm holding her close. Kai hadn't spoken further about her breakdown, but everything from the way he held her to his occasional surreptitious concerned glances suggested he understood, and it was OK. If any other guy had promised her it was always fine to stop, she would have taken it as a mere platitude. A variation on the Three Little Lies: "It'll only hurt for a minute," "I'll only stick the head in," and "I won't come in your mouth."

But Kai meant it. Kai might struggle with full disclosure at times, and despite his recent openness, she knew so much more still lay locked away in his fortress. Still, Art was right: Kai had a kind heart, and she believed he'd never hurt her intentionally. The fact that he'd been willing to let her go if she thought his "complicated health" was more than she could handle despite his obvious attraction to her meant a lot. What was the old saying? If you love someone, you have to be willing to set them free?

"There's rosemary, that's for remembrance. Pray you, love, remember. And there is pansies. That's for thoughts," Kai said along with the actress playing Ophelia.

"You have the whole play memorized, don't you?"

"Not *all* of it," he said. "But I have read it an obscene number of times." He shifted his weight as well as he could with her beside him, trying to stretch his back again, letting out a faint grunt. Her instinct was to ask if he was OK, but she didn't want to seem like she was hovering. She hadn't known Kai long, but she knew him well enough he'd tell her if he needed to call it a night. "And now everyone starts dying."

They'd reached the part of the play where the characters began to die, starting with Polonius, killed my mistake, then Ophelia, drowning herself, and proceeding from there to the final climactic sword fight between Hamlet and Laertes.

"I'm going to change my name again. To Laertes. What do you think?" He fingerspelled it, holding his arm out in front of him, and she could just barely make it

out in the light from the television. “Hmm. Kai’s a lot easier.” She felt him laugh subtly.

“You don’t look like a ‘Laertes.’”

“And I look like a ‘Kai’? I think I’m a little blond.”

Renee laughed, found his hand and caressed it with hers. She loved his long, unusual fingers, the tips rounded on the ends, which he’d explained was a result of his lung disease. “Well, I love ‘Kai.’” She froze, her heart suddenly the only sound she could hear. That had meant something totally different in her head. But Kai just squeezed her, and she let herself relax. “Did you pick it, when you changed your name?” She held her breath, remembering how angry he’d gotten the last time she’d asked about why his last name was different from his brother’s. Of course, that was a long time ago, when they’d barely known each other. A lot had changed between them since.

She felt him take in a deep breath. “No, Kai was always my name, it just wasn’t always my first name,” he replied, seemingly no anger in his voice. And he wasn’t trying to speak in that dreaded defensive monotone either. He was just answering the question. Perhaps, if she didn’t push him, he’d reveal something new about himself.

Kai shifted his weight again, just as the graveyard scene began, and he interrupted their conversation to quote the famous monologue along with Mel Gibson. “‘Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio, a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy. He hath borne me on his back a thousand times, and now, how abhorred in my imagination it is! My gorge rises at it. Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft. —Where be your gibes now? Your gambols? Your songs? Your flashes of merriment that were wont to set the table on a roar? Not one now to mock your own grinning?’” Kai grew quiet a moment, before continuing, “‘Alexander died, Alexander was buried, Alexander returneth to dust, the dust is earth, of earth we make loam—and why of that loam, whereto he was converted, might they not stop a beer barrel? Imperious Caesar, dead and turned to clay,/Might stop a hole to keep the wind away./Oh, that that earth, which kept the world in awe,/Should patch a wall t’ expel the winter’s flaw!’” Kai sighed, and they watched the rest of the movie in silence, Kai interrupting a few more times to quote lines—she really didn’t believe he didn’t know the entire play by heart.

Finally, when it had finished, she turned in his arms enough she could just make out his face, loving the way he cradled her. “So. What’d you think?”

“It was kind of weird to see it performed after all these years of just reading it. It made it more real somehow, and yet less.” His gaze was far away, though, and she wondered what he was thinking.

“Penny for your thoughts?”

He laughed, squeezed her. “For me, I think you’ll need more than a penny.” He took in a breath. “Just thinking of how fickle life is. How one moment, someone can be there, smiling and laughing and alive, and then . . .” He shrugged. “Even the greatest men all become dust, as Hamlet points out.”

“But they live on in our memories. In more . . . literal ways,” she said, laying a hand on his chest.

Kai looked down, his breath hitched.

“Would you ever want to meet the family of . . .”

Kai shook his head. “I don’t think I could. What would I even say to them?” Kai sighed. “I didn’t wish for this,” Kai said in a low voice, drawing a finger down his chest. “On my 21st birthday.”

Renee sat up on her knees so she could see him better, but she didn’t say

anything, just reached up and tucked some hair behind his ear.

He rolled his neck, stretching it, before offering a slim smile. “How do you wish for someone else to die so you won’t?” And that, Renee realized, probably said more about Kai than a thousand other words possibly could.

His eyes met hers for a long moment before he let out a forced laugh. “Well, I’ve got introspective and broody down, and I’m pretty crazy. Maybe I should change my name to Hamlet instead? Then I could be ‘bounded in a nutshell and count myself the king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams.’” He frowned, but there was a bit of a sparkle in his eyes, and she wondered if he were trying to make light of the situation for her sake or his. Perhaps a bit of both.

She decided to play along. “All right, Hamlet,” she said with a smile. “What’s your real first name?”

“Kai is my real first name. I changed it, legally.”

She stuck her tongue out, then stole a quick kiss that left him smiling.

“Joseph,” he said before she could ask again.

“Hmm. Your life story is very Old Testamenty. How fitting.”

Kai rolled his eyes, but he was smiling at her. It amazed her how open he was being with her about this, and a wave of happiness filled her. “My parents had a thing for simple, Biblical names, apparently: Jon, Joseph, Sara.” Renee noticed the mention of a sister. Kai had told her it was only him and his brother left. Did that mean he’d lost track of her, or was she also deceased? “My birth name was Joseph Kai Taylor. According to Jon, my father wanted Kai, but my mother didn’t, so it was a compromise.”

“So you’re Kai Joseph Fox now.” Renee guessed.

He nodded.

“My middle name is Marie. Not very exciting. It’s a family name. My mom’s name is Marie, and my maw maw’s middle name is Marie, too. Etc., etc.”

“I think it’s a pretty name,” he said, gesturing her in close for a kiss. It started out sweet, but quickly grew heated, pulling her into his lap, his hands palming her ass and rocking her into him. He wanted her. And she wanted him, too, but. . . .

She pushed him away, and he immediately stopped, releasing his grip, just as he’d promised, though a haze of lust hovered in his eyes. “I’m sorry.”

He shook his head. “It’s OK,” he said, but he was breathing heavily. “You just drive me crazy.” He pulled her close and playfully nipped at her ear, licking the skin just behind the lobe, making her insides explode. Fuck Jude. Fuck him for ruining this for her.

“I trust you, Kai, really, it’s just—”

Kai laid a long finger on her lips, just for an instant, to silence her. “A wise person once told me you can tell an arachnophobe a spider won’t hurt him, but he can’t help panicking every time he sees one.” He cupped her cheek, looking directly into her eyes; in the dim light, his brilliant blue irises looked almost indigo. “Trust me that I do understand, and it is OK. When you’re ready, you’re ready. Until then, I’ll do everything you feel comfortable with, including this.” He closed his eyes and brought her close in another heartbeat-stealing kiss.

But the kiss ended abruptly when she felt his leg spasm beneath her. She climbed off him and watched as Kai linked his hands above his head and attempted to stretch his back, grimacing.

“I may have to take a rain check on the Branagh film, Re.”

“You hurting?”

He smiled faintly. "I'm fine, I just don't think I'll make it through another three hours."

Renee snaked her hand between his back and the couch, working her fingers into the taut muscle. "You're so tight."

"Yeah. My back's always stiff at the end of the day, but it's being particularly stubborn tonight."

She nudged him. "Scoot forward."

"Re—"

She shushed him, pushing on his shoulders until he sighed good-naturedly and shifted his feet off his chair, pushing it aside. Then he gripped the edge of the sofa to pull his body forward. Despite his downplaying it, he moved stiffly, his back locked pretty tight from at least the midpoint down. He attempted to arch it, pressing his hands down while dipping his neck back, but he didn't manage much of a stretch. Renee rose, balancing in the cushions until she climbed behind him, nearly falling over.

He laughed. "Should I ask?"

"Shh," she said with a giggle, settling down behind him, sitting on the top of the couch. Renee placed her hands on Kai's shoulders, encouraging him to lean forward. Then she dug a knee in his lower back, her foot braced against the couch, attempting to relax the worst of his knots.

He groaned, hands gripping tight on the cushion edge.

"Am I hurting you?"

"Oh God, no. Don't stop."

Renee laughed, adjusted her balance to use her other knee. She did that for several minutes, then shifted so she could use her elbows on his upper back, alternating that with fingers struggling to relieve the tension. "God, Kai, I'm not strong enough for this," she finally admitted with a laugh, embracing him and planting a kiss near his ear.

"I didn't think you would be, but thank you."

She collapsed onto the couch, on her back, her legs in his lap. He looked over at her, smiling his relaxed grin, though the worry lines near his eyes betrayed his back hurt more than he was willing to admit.

"I should go," he said with obvious reluctance.

"But I have you trapped!" she said teasingly, wrapping her legs around his waist.

"You've definitely ensnared me," Kai said with a warm smile. "This was fun," he added, carefully pushing her off his lap and snagging his chair. "Even if it was our typically unconventional evening of conversation."

"Do you really have to leave?" Renee pulled herself up, linking a hand in one of his.

As if in answer, Kai's right leg kicked out suddenly, making him hiss and pull his hand back, gripping his thigh. "I have to take something before this gets worse. I don't want to risk hurting myself, and it's not safe for me to drive on the muscle relaxants."

Renee pouted, but nodded.

It took Kai a couple attempts to make the transfer, and Renee could see he was sweating, his foot bobbing. She suspected he was feeling more spasms she couldn't necessarily see.

"You could spend the night," she offered weakly. "I have a queen bed."

He beckoned her in for a quick kiss, looking deeply into her eyes as he replied,

“We both know you're not ready for that. And that's OK.” He smiled, but there was a weariness in his eyes now. “Plus, you don't want to sleep with me when I'm like this. I'll squirm and fidget and shift and kick until the meds knock me out, and then I'll probably stretch out and totally take over the mattress.” He winked, nipped at her lips playfully before pulling back. “I'll call you tomorrow. Maybe we can try Branagh in daylight.”

“Kai,” she said as she followed him toward the front door.

He stopped, slowly drifted around to face her. “Yeah?”

“Thank you,” she said in a small voice. “I've never had anything . . . like this . . . before,” she said, not sure how else to put it.

His smile sweetened. “Me either.”

A few minutes later, Renee watched, huddled in her doorway as Kai wheeled through the slight accumulation of new snow on his way to his car. She sighed, smiled when he waved to her once he'd freed up his hands, and resisted chasing after him in the cold and wet for another wonderful kiss.

Flashback: June 15-21, 1996

Note: This episode takes a slightly different format in that it encompasses more than a single day, but rather a few days from a week. It's also a flashback, jumping back in time four years from the current storyline.

Jon stood in the doorway of the deceased patients records room in the basement of Jonesville Memorial Hospital, passing his hand over his closely buzzed hair, another failed attempt to cure himself of the habit of pulling his fingers through it. The room was a disaster of boxes stacked haphazardly amidst ancient filing cabinets coated with dust. An asthma attack waiting to happen, he thought, sneezing into his elbow. A second sneeze echoed his.

"Tell me what we're doing down here?" Victoria Gregory, the nurse-turned office manager for the outpatient clinic and his partner in crime. She had her long hair twisted up into some kind of complex braid that made her strikingly attractive. He loved the way her locks cascaded loosely over her shoulders and onto her back, and had thought he'd miss them once they were tucked away. But the intricacy of the knots of hair seemed a fitting mirror of Victoria. If only he were older, she might actually show more than a passing interest in the awkward Doogie Howser. But he hurriedly dismissed the thought. At 25, nearly everyone was older than him anyway. The story of his life.

"I told you you didn't need to help me," Jon said, wading into the mire.

"They wouldn't buy the stolen keys story. If I'm going to potentially lose my job over this, I might as well be fully complicit."

Jon sighed.

"Look for records from October 1984. Last name Taylor." He struggled with his first drawer, which had rusted shut.

"Ah, this is personal," Vicky noted, checking boxes. "Who are we looking for?"

"My brother," Jon said coolly, putting his training to work.

"And why? 1984 was a long time ago."

Not long enough, Jon thought. "Either help me, or don't."

"You going to tell me why we're both risking our careers down here in the dust and mold? Are you heir to a secret family fortune and you need proof of your brother's death in order to claim it?"

Jon ignored her, slamming his drawer shut a little more forcefully than necessary.

They spent hours combing through files, and though Vicky had been chatty at first, she'd quickly picked up on Jon's silence and left him alone. It was getting to the point where Jon was thinking of calling it quits for the day when she called out.

"I found it. I think. The label's partially worn off; it's either September, October, November, or December 1984."

As Jon approached, he saw her glancing through some of the files, and he had to swallow down the swirl of emotion.

Vicky read aloud from two of the files. "Bryan J. Taylor, DOA. 09/30/84. Ann P. Taylor, time of death, 11:34 PM, 09/30/84." She looked up, and Jon's face must have answered her question. "Your parents?"

Jon nodded, put his hand out for the files. He didn't want Vicky reading them.

He wasn't sure if he could, either, but he'd rather make the choice than hear more of her reciting facts about the gruesome accident that had claimed his parents' lives and changed his forever.

She offered them without argument. His father's file was slim, but it appeared as if a significant chunk of the box had been dedicated to his mother's. Jon let Vicky hand him the file box, which he set aside for now.

"There's no other Taylor here, and I'm pretty sure this is the only box for that month. Must have been September based on the dates of death on all these files."

"We need to find October."

Vicky nodded and continued searching. "What happened?"

"Car accident," Jon replied simply, flashing his pen light on the labels of a stack of boxes. Nothing seemed to be in any order. It was going to take days, maybe weeks, to find Kai's file.

"Oh my God. You're *that* Jon Taylor."

Jon froze temporarily, but kept scanning for the correct box.

"I was a sophomore in college. The story was all over the news and the papers. The young couple who was killed by a drunk driver, and the three children they left behind."

Jon pulled open an unlabeled box and sorted through it, checking dates. "I was fourteen. My brother and I were separated from our sister. He had an asthma attack, and we were forcibly separated not long after that. I need to find his file."

"Why?"

Jon sighed in frustration; this box was from 1976. He decided to try another set of filing cabinets again. "Closure, all right? I just want to find his records. I don't want to talk."

Vicky held up her hands in surrender as she approached to help him check the opposite end of the drawer he had opened. "What was his name?"

"Joseph," Jon said in a quiet voice. "Joseph Taylor."

Several more hours later, and they'd come up empty. They'd finally located the box for October 1984, but Kai's file wasn't in it, and searching as many of the records since then hadn't turned up any answers either. At least not on him.

Jon was sorting through a box from only five years ago, at this point wondering if Kai hadn't died in 1984 after all, and maybe he would find him here. The last name Taylor caught his eye, and he pulled the file without reading the first name, flipping it open. His stomach fell into his feet.

Sara P. Taylor. DOB 05/12/80. DOD 07/11/91.

"Jon?" Wading through dusty records for hours had a way of dropping formalities; Ms. Gregory had quickly become "Vicky," and Dr. Taylor, "Jon." Jon had to admit he liked hearing his first name from Vicky's lips.

"My sister," Jon said in a quiet voice, scanning the file. "Complications of acute lymphocytic leukemia, apparently. Only a few years ago. I may have been able to save her life." Jon let that hang in the air a moment, sinking down onto a stack of boxes to prevent himself from collapsing onto the floor.

"You don't know that," Vicky assured him, taking the file and perching beside him, a friendly hand on his arm. "You may not have been a match. She may have died anyway."

Jon nodded vaguely as reality hit him: Kai was dead. Sara was dead.

He was alone.

His eyes began to water, but he blinked, wiping them on his sleeve. "God, this dust is killing me," he said quickly, crossing the room and immediately diving into another stack of files, though it was hard to read labels through misted vision.

"Maybe he's still alive," Vicky ventured. "Or maybe he went by another name?"

Jon wiped his face again, composed himself. "Like he was adopted?"

Vicky shrugged. "He was six when your parents died. That was what, twelve years ago? It's possible."

Jon leaned against the cabinet; his eyes were red and itchy from all the dust and mold, and he was exhausted. He'd used up his only day off in weeks for a search that hadn't yielded much except to remind him how alone he really was. "If he's not dead, and he hasn't left Jonesville, then maybe the pulmonology records will help."

Vicky started to back away, shaking her head. "Oh, no."

"Please. If he's not dead . . . if he's alive, you have to help me find him."

She sighed heavily. "Fine. I'll do some discreet digging. You know this would be a lot easier if you just asked Dr. MacDonald, right?"

Jon rubbed the top of his head. "Just do me this favor, please. I don't want anyone to know about this. I don't want them to question why I'm enrolled in the fellowship program here."

"Fine," Vicky said, slamming a drawer shut and waving toward the door. "But you're buying me dinner and drinks first."

Vicky had suggested a little dive called The Iowan, the closest thing to a sports bar Jonesville had. They were sitting together in a back booth, Vicky sipping from a bottle of beer while Jon studied the menu.

"So you *are* old enough to drink, right?"

Jon glared at her. "Funny."

She laughed. "I'm sorry." Jon had explained he didn't really drink alcohol when she'd insisted he join her in a bottle of beer or two. "Is it because of your parents?" Vicky asked, suddenly feeling awful for not considering the fact sooner.

Jon shook his head. "I'm diabetic. It's easier for me to manage my blood sugar without bringing alcohol into the equation."

"Oh," Vicky said, not sure what else to say.

Jon laughed, folded the menu. "It isn't catching."

Had Jon just made a joke? She hadn't known him long, but he was incredibly serious, seemingly all the time. He'd finished his first year of his fellowship early, transferring into Jonesville's program but showing up before his second year officially started to meet the staff and get settled. He was both brilliant and driven, the type of guy Vicky probably would have loathed when she was in school, but now that she was a little older and wiser found shockingly attractive.

Vicky found herself smiling. A shout echoed from the group gathered at the bar; apparently the team at bat had hit a triple play. "Do you like baseball?"

Jon shrugged. "Never been into sports. My dad, though, he loved basketball. I even tried to play it, for him, but . . ." Jon shrugged. "I wasn't much of an athlete."

Vicky sipped her beer. "My dad and brothers . . . huge sports fans. Football, basketball, baseball, hockey, you name it. I like football well enough, but nothing nearly bordering on fanatical."

Their waitress arrived to take their orders, and Vicky ordered another beer. It

probably wasn't a good idea to get drunk tonight, not with Jon, but she supposed she could regret it later.

Jon had gone quiet, pretending to watch one of the TVs, though she suspected he was really lost in his thoughts.

"So you became a doctor because of your brother?" she asked, the beer loosening her lips, though she immediately regretted the question. So far, they'd avoided talking about their day in the records room, and how heavily not finding any evidence of his brother had weighed on Jon.

Jon nodded, but then he shrugged. "Yes, but I knew it was what I wanted before he was born. I was always hanging out in the library, reading books about science and medicine. I wanted to know exactly how the body worked, as far back as I can remember."

Vicky laughed. "You're adorable."

Jon flushed, a deep red coloring his pale skin from collarbone to crown. "I was diagnosed with type I diabetes when I was seven, not long before my brother was born, but I'd suspected that I had it awhile before that."

Vicky stared at him. "You diagnosed yourself. When you were in first grade."

Jon shrugged. "It just took a while to get my parents to believe me and get me tested. It was . . . a tough time for them," Jon admitted. "Not an easy pregnancy," he added hesitantly.

Vicky saw a shadow fall over Jon's face and decided a change of subject might help. "I knew I didn't want to be a lawyer or an accountant or anything like that," Vicky said, "and I didn't think I was smart enough for medical school—"

"I don't believe that."

Vicky shrugged. "Nearly twelve years of school wasn't really feasible for me at the time anyway," she added quietly.

"That's why I did it in nine," Jon said with a grin. Despite the fact that he was probably the smartest person she knew, and the youngest person in the pulmonology department (barring a couple nurses-in-training), he was shockingly humble, comments like this coming off intended as a joke at his expense rather than a brag.

"Anyway, it didn't take me long to realize I didn't really like being a nurse," Vicky laughed, finishing her beer and signaling for another. "I like my paperwork," she added with a nod.

Jon smiled then, a full, brilliant flash of teeth that lit his gray eyes and lifted the seemingly perpetual weariness from his face. In that moment, he no longer looked tired or jaded, but very much the 25-year-old kid he was.

Vicky sighed. Asked the question she normally would have put off, because she couldn't stand that smile and how much it made her want him. "What will you do if I can't find him?" She didn't need to specify who "him" was.

Jon let out a harsh breath, managing a faint smile, a pale imitation of his previous grin, when their waitress appeared with their orders, setting a plate in front of each of them and another beer for Vicky. "Look into the system, hope they don't fight me too much. Orphanages, group homes, etc. They'll have to have some record of him, a trail I can follow, even if he was adopted, even if he was moved to another city." Jon slid his burger off the bun, cutting it up like a steak. "I'll find him, what happened to him," he said determinedly. "Hopefully before my second year officially starts."

It was a week before Vicky pulled Jon aside one day, into her office. "There's no sign of

your brother, either as a living patient or a deceased one. At least that I can find. No Joseph Taylors, J Taylors, or JK Taylors with anything close to your brother's birth date in any of our files."

Jon rubbed the top of his head, enraged that he couldn't pull his fingers through it to relieve some frustration. "He has to be there."

"If he is, it's under a different name."

Jon shook his head. "If he was adopted, and changed his name, I'll have to pray the records weren't sealed, or I'll never find Kai." Jon sighed heavily, sinking into the couch.

"What did you say?"

Jon shook his head. "I may never know what happened to my brother."

Vicky drew closer, yanking Jon's chin to make him look at her.

"Hey. What the hell?" Jon said, jerking back.

"I can't believe I didn't see it before. My God."

"What?" Jon snapped.

"Your brother did change his name," Vicky said, rushing to her desk. She grabbed a sheet of paper, a list of patients of some kind. "Right there," she said, pointing to one of the names.

"Kai Fox." Jon's voice faltered.

"How many Kais could there be who are patients here? Is he deaf?"

"Mute."

"You said his name was Joseph."

"It was. His legal name. But he always went by Kai. I never mentioned it, because I didn't expect . . ." Jon looked up, his eyes surprisingly glossy. "Oh God. This means he's alive."

Vicky nodded. "I haven't been working this job that long, but there's a boy. About eighteen. Deaf, I always thought, since he never spoke and Dr. Johnsen always had an interpreter for him—"

"He's Dr. Johnsen's patient?"

Vicky nodded again. "I don't know how none of us saw the resemblance. I guess the age gap—the hair and eyes are different, especially with yours cut the way it is. And his disability. Different last name. None of us ever thought twice about it."

"He was adopted, then? Is he happy?"

Vicky shrugged. "I don't really know him. More of him. I've seen him in the waiting room, or heading in and out of the exam rooms. He doesn't talk, so it wasn't like we could have a conversation. He always looks . . ." She shook her head, as if changing her mind.

"Tell me, please."

She sighed. "So sad. I don't know if I've ever seen him smile."

Jon frowned. The Kai he remembered was always a happy child, despite everything he went through with his breathing and his MLS. "I need to find him. Page me when you have his current address."

Kai lay in his bed, alone in his room, as he had been for nearly two years, staring up at the ceiling. His hips, back, and legs hurt, and his breathing wasn't good today. It probably didn't help that for the past month he'd been reserving his medications: taking only a puff instead of two from his inhalers, cutting his pills in halves and hiding the rest in one of his secret caches. He had a few dollars squirreled away, but they wouldn't buy

him more than a sandwich. Too bad none of the orderlies would play poker with him anymore. And though Ms. Evans had helped him apply for benefits, he couldn't count on receiving anything immediately.

Ms. Evans had offered to help Kai apply for a spot in one of the state's adult group homes, though she'd warned him he would probably fall in between the cracks: sick enough to apply because of his severe asthma, but not really disabled enough he'd get one of the limited spots. Not that he really wanted to spend the rest of his life in an institution anyway.

Kai took a few labored breaths, his eyes tracing the familiar cracks and spots in the ceiling. He'd breathe easier if he sat up, but passing out held a certain allure and escape. Art didn't have the budget for another employee, even part time, and no one else was interested in hiring a sickly, gimpy kid fresh out of high school who still struggled to be understood sometimes.

Kai's birthday was only a week away, which meant he'd be kicked out of the only real home he'd known for the last twelve years. With no means of support and no where to go. Jake, who was starting college soon, had offered to let Kai crash at his mom's house for the summer, but after that, Kai was on his own.

Kai had never been truly "on his own" his whole life.

Even without the practical problems, the thought alone was terrifying, and he hated that he felt that way. Kai didn't relish becoming one of those crazy crippled guys with a shaggy beard and dreadlocks, begging for change on street corners.

A knock on his door pulled him from his thoughts, and he pushed himself up when it edged open. Frankie, a boy of about twelve with diplegic CP who'd been a resident for nearly three years. He also looked up to Kai, as ridiculous as that was.

Frankie pulled himself into Kai's room with his forearm crutches, his body swaying with each step, until he sank into the other bed. David's bed. Kai didn't like anyone sitting there, but he was too tired to manage English. Besides, it was difficult for Frankie to sign and stay upright; sitting freed up his hands.

Kai pushed himself up farther, so he could sign. "What?"

Frankie wasn't fluent by any stretch, but he'd picked up enough that Kai could converse with him simply without speaking.

Frankie slipped out of his crutches, laying them against the bed. "There's a man here to see you."

Oh, it was Saturday? Visiting Day. Since graduation, Kai's days had begun to blur together. Not that Kai ever had many visitors. Jake had dropped in once or twice during high school, but had determined CH totally depressing (Kai couldn't argue there) and never come back, occasionally helping Kai sneak out for a day at his house instead. Art would stop by from time to time, usually with books, but it was unlikely he'd show up this early on a busy Saturday, especially so close to "kicking out day." David had popped in about once every six weeks after aging out, but after a few months (and a promise he'd come back for Kai), he'd never returned. Kai had learned early not to take much stock in promises. From anyone. Even his "brother."

Still, a flicker of the foreign emotion hope fluttered up. Birthdays, except for one's 18th, passed unnoted at County House. But David and Kai had always celebrated each other's in their own way. David had to know Kai's 18th was in a few days. Maybe he'd kept his promise after all.

"Who?" Kai asked, thumb on his chin, index finger out, wiggling, eyebrows furrowed.

“I don’t know.”

Kai sighed heavily. He hadn’t planned to do much but lie in bed feeling sorry for himself, so he hadn’t bothered with his braces. He wouldn’t now, either. Not for some stranger. Kai pushed himself to the edge of the bed, lifting his legs off the mattress. He noticed Frankie was trying to get his attention, so he looked up.

“Maybe you won the lottery.”

Kai watched Frankie’s clumsy finger spelling, then sighed. *“You need to be 18 to play the lottery. Besides, it doesn’t work that way.”* Kai grabbed his crutches from their spot beside his bed, leaning against the wall. *“You don’t know because you didn’t see him, or you don’t know because you don’t recognize him?”*

It took a moment for Frankie to understand Kai, and when he did, he said, “Oh!” Out loud, continuing in English, “I didn’t get a good look.”

Kai sighed, levered himself to his feet. Might as well get this over with.

Kai crutched toward the common room, his steps echoed by Frankie, who was following him like a lost puppy. The din of conversation, the occasion giggle or cackle of laughter, trickled out toward them. Kai was so sick of this place, and all these stupid kids who still believed that there was anyone out there who gave two shits about them. Kids like Frankie.

Kai lingered near the side doorway, surveying the room, searching for his visitor. His eyes found Mrs. Jimenez, whose daughter Julia had been a resident for six years now, since she apparently couldn’t afford to care for her. Or at least that’s what Julia believed. Next, he saw the Youngs, a religious couple who visited once a month trying to convert the kids for “protection of their eternal souls,” though Kai didn’t see them lining up to adopt anyone. Last, he spied a crying young woman, standing off to the side beside a toddler in one of those stroller wheelchairs, talking to the Warden. Another surrender in the making. At least that girl would be too young to remember her parents and her siblings, if she had any. It was easier. Better that way.

Then Kai spotted George, one of JMH’s staff ASL interpreters. It was unlikely he’d dropped by to visit Kai, which meant someone had hired him, freelance, to facilitate the visit. David and Jake didn’t need an interpreter, and Art had always managed well enough without one.

Then Kai saw him. The mysterious man. Tall, thin, blond hair buzzed close to his head, gray eyes searching the room. It was impossible, yet who else could this man be? The resemblance, the fact that this man had to be in his mid-to-late 20s, was impossible to ignore. After twelve years, had Jon finally come for him?

Kai’s shock made him misjudge his next step, and he nearly fell, an orderly rushing up to help. But Kai’s glare made the man change his mind as Kai regained his balance.

He stood, watching the interpreter and the unknown man interact, his mind swirling with emotions and thoughts. It was good George was here to speak for him, because there was no way he’d manage English right now.

George led Jon to a table, gesturing for him to sit. Jon obeyed, surprised by how nervous he was, his excitement tempered with shame. Kai had lived twelve years in this horrible place? Why hadn’t Jon tried to find him sooner? Certainly Kai would wonder the same thing. Maybe Kai wouldn’t even agree to talk to him.

George sat beside Jon, but turned to face him slightly. “I’m here as a communication facilitator, OK? That means I am ethically obligated to be a neutral

medium. I'm not here to give my opinions on anything, simply interpret. I'll sit here, and he'll sit across from us, which will make it as seamless as possible. Don't look at me or talk to me. Just talk to him like you would anyone else and think of me as the 'voice' for both of you."

Jon passed his hand over his head a few times. God, why the fuck did he cut his hair?

"Don't say, 'tell him' or 'don't interpret that,' because I will interpret *everything* you say. Do you understand?"

Jon nodded.

George spotted Kai in the crowd and waved him over.

Jon watched as Kai used his forearm crutches to maneuver his way around tables and wheelchairs and people. He seemed to walk fairly well, all things considered, but the way he relied on the sticks meant Kai's MLS still bothered him. Jon wondered how much. God, they'd lost so many years.

Next, Jon noticed how frail Kai looked. Tall, but gangly, his skin pale; perhaps he hadn't hit his final growth spurt yet. Jon hadn't really hit his until a couple years earlier. And though Jon had filled out, he was still thin for his height. Kai's hair had also lightened to a shocking golden blond, falling in a chaotic mess, framing a face that no longer had the soft lines of a boy, but the more angular features of a man, a hint of facial hair on his chin and cheeks when the light hit it just right.

One thing that hadn't changed: Kai's eyes, still that piercing oceanic blue that had lent him his name.

Kai stopped in front of the table, smiled at George, but ignored Jon as he used a crutch tip to pull the chair out, glaring daggers at an orderly who'd stepped forward to help. So far, Kai's body language wasn't a good sign that this would go well.

Kai settled in the seat, leaning his sticks on the table, honing his glare again at the same orderly when he attempted to touch them. Kai adjusted his legs with his hands and stared at Jon for a few minutes before glancing over at George and signing something: a one-handed flick of his hand on his chest, middle finger touching, then something in a circle in front of him Jon couldn't make out as more than a blur of fingers, Kai's facial expressions changing with each sign. George signed back, uninterpreted, a few things, then seemed to be redirecting Kai to his purpose. Kai had to know George; perhaps he was asking how he was and now George was trying to remind Kai he was here on a job.

Kai obviously seemed more interested in talking to George than to Jon. Suddenly, Jon hated even more that he'd let his sign language skills lapse and wither.

"*Either one of you can start whenever you're ready,*" George both signed and spoke.

Jon had rehearsed so many things he'd wanted to say to Kai once they finally sat down together, but none of them came to him now that he was seated in front of his brother, someone he'd mourned for over ten years. "Kai, it's Jon. Your brother."

Kai didn't respond immediately, but Jon did observe that Kai's breath didn't come easily, his neck and shoulders working harder than they should, though Kai didn't show in his face any discomfort; it was obvious he was used to needing to breathe this way, and it made Jon frown reflexively.

"*What did you expect?*" Kai signed angrily, apparently in reaction to Jon's frown; George's voice conveyed bitterness in his tone. "*A unicorn? Or perhaps the gold at the end of the rainbow?*" Kai's facial expressions showed mock joy, which again,

George conveyed in his tone. Apparently sarcasm existed just as well in sign language as it did in English.

“I expected to find your death certificate,” Jon said in a quiet voice.

Kai watched George’s interpretation, his eyes narrowing, before glancing over at Jon, studying him. Finally, he signed and George interpreted, “*Well, here I am, alive and kicking. Sorry to disappoint. And the kicking isn’t usually voluntary, so watch your shins.*” More bitterness. Jon supposed he deserved it.

“I’m sorry,” Jon said, not sure what else to say.

Kai’s nostrils flared. “*Twelve years. You didn’t think to look for me at all during that time? I would have looked for you. I tried, as best as I could, and then I gave up, because dreams are nothing but vain fantasy.*”

Jon blinked, glanced at George. Did Kai just quote Shakespeare to him, in sign?

“It’s rude not to look at a Deaf person when you’re having a conversation,” George explained, signing something, though Jon suspected it wasn’t what he had said in English, perhaps simply a heads up to Kai to remind him that Jon didn’t know the “rules of engagement.”

Kai slammed his hand on the table, making Jon jump, but it also made him look back at Kai, who was obviously even more angry than before. He gestured with two fingers, pointing from Jon to his own eyes. “*Look at me when you talk. It’s bad enough you don’t know sign.*”

Jon repeated the sign he’d seen George use earlier when interpreting his apology. “*Sorry.*”

Kai snorted. “*Why are you here?*”

Jon blinked, stopped himself at the last second from looking at George. “To see you. Once I found out you were still alive, I came straight here.”

“*No. Why, after all these years, did you try to find me now? Why are you here in Jonesville?*”

“I started my fellowship in Des Moines, but heard about the dual program here at JMH so I transferred. I start my second year officially next month.”

Kai’s eyes narrowed. He seemed to be waiting for something.

“Do you have plans for after the 26th? Do they force you to leave immediately, or do they give you a few days?”

Kai blinked, and his angry facade seemed to chip and falter. “*We have to leave by eight AM that morning.*”

“Do you have somewhere to stay? A job?”

Kai looked away, and Jon wondered if that was rude, too, or if it simply expressed shame the way it would in a regular hearing conversation?

Kai finally looked back up at Jon. “*I’m not going home with you.*” It hurt to hear George’s voice as he interpreted those words. It wasn’t exactly that Jon had expected an enthusiastic reunion, Kai elated to see him, but he’d hoped for a little less distrust. “*How do I even know you’re really my brother?*”

That surprised Jon, and he wasn’t sure what to say. How could he “prove” who he was? He fished in his pocket, pulled out his JMH ID, offering it to Kai.

Kai studied it, glancing up from the picture at Jon like an immigration agent verifying his identity. “*You’re a doctor?*”

Jon nodded. “I’m working on my pulmonology fellowship.”

Kai stared at Jon, appraising him, then fingerspelled something back to George, who interpreted, “*Pulmonology?*”

Jon nodded.

“That’s how you found me.” He pushed the ID back across the table.

“Yes. I haven’t been here long, or I would have found you sooner.”

Kai held up his hand, which Jon easily understood as a “shut up” gesture.

“What did I dress up as the Halloween before our parents died?”

Jon blinked, and couldn’t help glancing over at George before returning his gaze to Kai. “What?”

“The Halloween before our parents died, you took me trick-or-treating. What did I wear?”

Jon sighed. He remembered everything about Kai’s first six years vividly; the curse on the other side of the coin that was the blessing of an eidetic memory. It was Kai’s first and only (so far as Jon knew) opportunity to go out on Halloween, his health and walking finally good enough that their father had allowed the night out. Kai had been ecstatic, and their family had even taken a rare trip to Omaha—to the Big City—for a day to pick out a costume. Kai had selected one based on his favorite superhero at the time, The Hulk, because he was big and strong and didn’t need to talk to get his point across. As happy as that shopping day was, the memory, and all that followed—including Kai’s month-long hospital stay later that year from pneumonia—made it bittersweet.

“The Incredible Hulk!” Jon signed, doing his best to imitate, from memory, the signs Kai had invented as a child.

Kai blinked furiously, and his chin trembled before he grit his teeth, his jaw visibly working. *“Why are you here? What do you want from me?”* Kai’s signing had lost its harsh, almost violent edge, and George echoed this in his softer tone.

“I know I can’t make up for the last twelve years, but maybe you can let me try? I haven’t signed a lease anywhere yet. We could get a two bedroom, and you can stay with me. Go to school or work or whatever it is you want to do. We can get to know each other again.”

Kai breathed uneasily in and out for several long moments before finally signing, *“I need to think about it.”* Then he looked at George. *“George, can you give us five minutes?”*

“You sure?” George asked, both signing and speaking, seemingly talking to both of them.

Jon wasn’t sure what Kai’s plan was, but he nodded, and George rose, letting them both know he wouldn’t be far if they needed him again.

Kai slouched now that George was gone, drumming his fingers on the table over and over and over in an annoying rhythm. “You really want what?” Kai said, *with his voice*, to Jon’s great amazement, even if his pronunciation was a little soft, his final consonants not as crisp as they could be, his “L’s” and “R’s” sounding similar.

Jon was so shocked he could hardly process what Kai had asked. “You can talk?!”

“Since age fourteen,” Kai said in the same accent. “I don’t like.”

Jon was dumbfounded. “So I didn’t need George?”

Kai shook his head. “I prefer sign. More easy. Don’t need think.” Kai seemed to be talking in a kind of hybrid grammar of ASL and English, from what Jon could recall of it. As if sensing the way Jon’s mind was working, Kai added, “School all year good English. Hard. Think. Think. Think. Here, vacation. Break.”

Jon blinked.

“You forget sign, but I need learn talk English.”

“I thought you were dead, Kai. Signing reminded me too much of you. I’m sorry.”

Kai waved it off, literally.

“You’ve been here the whole time?”

Kai hesitated before finally nodding. He took in a breath. “You were adopted.” Kai spoke slowly, in proper English this time, focusing on his pronunciation, the stop between the “p” and “t” of “adopted” harsh, as if he had to focus on articulating the sounds. Kai’s inflection was flat, but based on his body language of their earlier interpreted conversation, Jon suspected it wasn’t a question.

“Yes. An older man. He paid for my school so he could show me off like a trained monkey, but it got me here.”

Kai blinked, his expression unreadable. “You abandoned me.” He hesitated before the “ed” of “abandon,” as if remembering the tense marker at the last moment, his hand reflexively waving backward, the ASL indication of “past.”

“They drugged me and dragged me away.” Jon noticed Kai’s confusion; perhaps the two words sounded too similar? “I tried to stay with you, but they wouldn’t let me. When I fought them, they knocked me out. I woke up and no one would tell me what happened to you. I thought. I assumed. You had to be dead.”

Kai took this in, his blank mask fading only slightly on the edges, though it was still difficult to read. Jon wasn’t sure if he preferred the anger or this; at least with the anger, he knew what Kai was thinking.

“I didn’t look for you sooner because I was in school, nowhere near here. And . . . I was afraid. These last twelve years I held out a thread of hope that maybe you were still alive, and maybe, unconsciously, I knew that the moment I saw it in black and white, that you had . . . died. . . .”

Kai blinked, but didn’t say or sign anything.

“Sara is dead,” Jon said, shocked at how it just came out, harsh and blunt and sudden.

Kai leaned back; some of his mask slipped.

“Leukemia, five years ago.”

Kai swallowed but said nothing.

“We’re all we have left, Kai. If you have somewhere to go when you turn eighteen, fine. I won’t stop you. But if you don’t . . .” Jon shook his head. “I wish I could take you away from this place right now. Today.”

Kai laughed, a harsh sound. Even though he’d spoken several sentences, it still felt strange for Jon to hear his brother’s laughter, which had always been silent. “I am not a puppy. You can’t pay a \$10 license fee and take me home.” Jon noticed Kai was attempting to use proper English grammar and pronunciation now, though he struggled with “license.”

“Then I’ll come get you on your birthday. We’ll find an apartment that works for both of us. I’ll get you a car—”

“Drive how? I don’t know,” Kai said, slipping on his grammar, though he kept his consonants abnormally sharp.

“Then you can learn.”

Kai seemed to relax, a sparkle appearing in his eyes for the first time since he’d walked into the room. He hesitated for a moment, as if trying to formulate the English in his head, before speaking. “Could I have a wheelchair? One I don’t need share?” Kai wasn’t excited by the prospect of his own room or even his own car, but the idea of

having a wheelchair all to himself. Did that mean he didn't have one here? That he had to share with the other children?

"Of course," Jon said. "We can go and have you measured so you can get one that fits you perfect, in any color you want."

Kai beamed then, and for an instant, Jon caught a glimpse of the child he remembered before Kai forced the smile away, replacing it with skepticism. "You want what from me?" Kai asked again. "I have money none."

"I don't need money. Just to know you," Jon said, hiding his exasperation at Kai's continued lack of trust. He had no idea what Kai's life had been like these last twelve years to make him so leery of accepting help or gifts, even from his own brother.

Kai held up his left hand with three fingers—thumb, index, and middle—outstretched, pointing to one at a time as he spoke. "I don't breathe good. I don't walk good. I don't talk good—unless I try hard hard," Kai said, the final stop on his "don'ts" particularly harsh. "You will learn sign?" Kai had to pause to make sure he added the inflection at the end, though his raised eyebrows gave away that it was a question.

"Yes," Jon said. "I will help you find a job, if that's what you want. I will help you get into college, if that's what you want. I want to make up for our lost years. That's the only thing that I want from you." Jon sighed at Kai's continued doubt. "And you can always change your mind later. What do you say? *Brothers again?*" Jon finished in sign, hoping he got it right, straining his memory.

Kai's face flickered in a brief smile, repeated Jon's sign while nodding. "*Brothers again.*"

November 17, 2000

Kai answered the door, rolling backwards to give Renee space to enter. He was smiling, that smile she'd come to learn was *hers*, because he only ever flashed it when he was looking at her. It wasn't too broad or too pinched, just a little teeth showing, and slightly lopsided, and it usually went with a kind of far-off, misty look in his eyes. He nibbled his lip.

"So what's going on?" She unzipped her coat and hung it on one of the hooks at wheelchair height near the door, also very conveniently placed for someone as petite as she was.

"Uh, I have something I want to show you," Kai said, suddenly nervous, rapidly doing a 180 and pushing toward the hallway. Renee followed a few steps behind, watched as Kai wheeled to the kitchen table, pulled out one of the chairs, and arranged it so it was facing outward. He gestured for her to sit.

Renee looked at him, perplexed, but obeyed.

Kai pushed toward her till their knees touched, and it made her stomach dance. "Just . . . just wait here, OK? I'll . . . I'll be right out." Red had crept up his neck, and he smiled another new smile, this one slim and shy, before hurrying into his bedroom.

Nervous wasn't normally an emotion Kai struggled with. Anxiety, yes, but nervousness? He pushed to his dresser and scanned the prescription bottles until he found the one he was looking for, tapping out a hydroxyzine into his palm and swallowing it dry. Just in case. He closed his eyes, took a few steadying breaths. His body was telling him *no!*, his heart racing, his stomach knotting, but if he didn't listen to it, he remembered how excited he was and how much he wanted Renee to be the one to share this moment with him.

Swallowing, Kai wheeled to the door, opening it just a crack. Then he angled his chair carefully, set the brakes, and used his hands to push himself forward on the seat. He could feel his body wanting to panic, but the hydroxyzine worked quickly, and he focused hard on his breathing, on each minor task as he did them, forcing his brain away from the anxiety, as Dr. Miller had coached him. He also kept in mind how excited and happy he was, pushing away the negative feelings.

Once his feet were on the floor, in position, Kai reached for his crutches, angled against the wall nearby, slipping his arms into them. He opened and closed his fists a few times on the grips, took a deep breath, then placed the tips and heaved his way to his feet. He shifted his weight until he heard his left brace lock, then again to use one crutch tip to push the door open the rest of the way. Even with the medicine and the mental prep, he felt like he was going to throw up his racing heart. It was one thing for Renee to see him walking without the sticks, another for her to see him in the chair, but the crutches changed everything. They were like two giant yellow highlighter strokes on his abnormal gait.

She's seen you on the parallel bars, walking worse than this, Kai reminded himself as he took his first few steps out of his room and into the main area of the apartment. Carefully planting each crutch, negotiating his right leg forward, which still dragged a little, waiting for the posterior lock at his knee to engage, then rotating his body to his right side to help his left foot clear the floor, partially using the crutches to

pull his locked left leg forward.

He looked up to see Renee's expression, but it was unreadable, and his anxiety spiked, held back only by the drug. He stood in the door to the hall, leaning on his crutches, moderating his breathing and desperately trying to maintain his neutral mask as Renee rose and walked toward him. She reached out, smoothed one hand over the tense muscle of a forearm, then dipped her head back to look up at him, smiling, since even with the slight lean, he was nearly a foot and a half taller than her.

She gently arched her brows, then drew her hand over her forehead in the sign for "forget." She pointed at him, then stood on tiptoes as she gestured in the air to indicate "really tall," shifting her facial expression to emphasize her point. She'd said, in ASL, "*I forgot how **tall** you are.*"

It was like she'd stuck a needle into the balloon of his anxiety, immediately bursting it, leaving room for a host of other emotions to come rushing in, all battling for expression. "My doctor just cleared me yesterday. . . . I wanted you to be the first . . ."

Renee smiled up at him, asked, strictly with her body language, if she could hug him. He nodded, his own smile appearing as she threaded her arms between his and his body, wrapping them around his waist. Her touch immediately relaxed him, comforted him in a way he hadn't even realized he'd needed until he felt it. Perhaps because she just accepted him. Not unlike Nikki, yet not quite like her, either.

"If this had never happened, that would have been OK," she said, looking up, her eyes sincere. "But I'm happy for you, Kai. And I'm really glad you chose to share it with me like this."

Kai let out a long breath. "I can't walk too far or stand too long, but . . . do you want to go somewhere? Somewhere I couldn't go in the chair?"

"Sure," she said with a playful half smile, slipping one hand partially into his pocket.

"You don't mind? People stare when I'm in the chair, but like this they gape. And they'll be staring at you, too. If it makes you uncomfortable . . ."

"I waited weeks just to talk to you again. You think a couple crutches are going to scare me off?"

Kai shifted his weight, freeing up an arm. He dropped it out of the crutch so he could pull Renee closer to him in a brief hug. "I'm glad you're so persistent, because I'm an idiot."

Renee chuckled. "I coulda told you that. But I still love you." Kai felt Renee stiffen, then clear her throat. "Uh, you know what I mean." But she didn't let go, and Kai realized hearing that word, from Renee, wasn't terrifying.

It was wonderful.

Even though Kai had warned her, and she'd been out with him before, in his chair, the looks he garnered amazed her. Pity. Curiosity. Disgust. And he'd been right: she got them, too, though hers were slightly different. Confusion. Appreciation. Skepticism. Like people were trying to work out her motivation for being with him. She forced herself to ignore the gapers and focus on Kai. He didn't move quickly or easily, but he did have his own quirky rhythm, and she loved the way his hands and arms looked as they supported his weight with each crutch. It was an adjustment, again, to his height, and she realized part of her missed the chair. But she knew what a huge milestone this was, how much it meant to him, and her insides still buzzed with the fact that he'd wanted her to be the first to see him walking again, outside of PT. She loved his quiet determination, and

realized no matter what their onlookers might think of her, they'd never guess what she was really feeling. Pride. Attraction. Affection.

She had expected things to be a little awkward for him with both hands occupied as they were by the crutches, but apparently, even though she had never seen him using them before, it didn't mean they were new to him. At the ticket counter, he simply adjusted his weight, slipped out of one crutch, leaning it against the surface, and reached back for his wallet, managing to extract the money from it single handed. He'd handled doors similarly smoothly, at least from her perspective, standing off to the left, dropping his arm out of its crutch and pulling it open, sometimes using the crutch to push the door open farther before planting the tip back on the ground. She was sure he'd manage by himself, but years of indoctrination by her grandmother meant she couldn't resist holding it for him once he got it open.

The theater was packed, and Renee was grateful they'd opted to see *Requiem for a Dream*, a more cerebral film that had been out a month instead of the night's blockbuster release, *The 6th Day*. Kai had confessed he didn't like crowds, especially now that he was immunocompromised, and though he'd worn a scarf to cover his mouth and nose, he hoped he wouldn't have to wear it or the surgical mask he'd brought if their showing was mostly empty.

Even without the mask, though, most people seemed to give Kai a wide berth, as if he were contagious. As if they'd somehow catch "crippled." Renee couldn't help rolling her eyes.

"I think I can count the number of times I've gone to the movies on one hand," Kai said, standing just inside the doorway, looking around. "Without using ASL," he added with a grin she could see as a sparkle in his eyes.

"Well, considering what passes for 'quality cinematic entertainment' lately, I don't think you've missed much." Renee angled her neck to look up at him with her own grin.

He nudged his chin toward the concessions. "You want anything? I'm afraid you'll have to carry it yourself, but . . ." He offered a slight shrug.

"I'm good," she said, laying her hand lightly on top of one of his, which gripped the handle of his crutch tightly. "But I don't mind carrying anything if you want something."

Kai ended up getting some water and a box of candy—Renee had learned pretty quickly that Kai had a sweet tooth the size of Mt. Rushmore, and it was something about him she found enormously endearing. He viewed eating as a chore, but put something sugary in front of him, and his eyes would light up like a child's. In fact, the more she was with Kai, the more she realized he was almost like two different people: who he was in front of strangers or those he didn't know well, and the person he was with friends and family—with her. At first, he seemed quiet, reserved, distant, cold, but in reality, he was smart and funny, more sensitive than he was willing to admit, and sweet as the treats he loved.

They entered the theater for their movie, one of the mid-sized ones, with a flight of gently sloping stairs on each side of the rows of seats. It was empty, save for a few people up toward the back, since they'd arrived extra early for the show. *If you're with me, you'll get used to showing up early for everything*, he explained. *It makes things easier, gives me time to figure out how or if I can get in somewhere.*

"Take this off for me?" Kai asked, holding his chin up.

Renee's eyebrows furrowed. "Are you sure?"

“If it gets more crowded, I’ll put on a mask. I promise,” Kai said. “But this is hot.”

She chuckled, stood on tiptoe to carefully unwind the scarf from around his face. He shook his head, tossing his hair everywhere, making her laugh.

“Ah, that’s better. Thanks.”

She followed him past the front rows of seats, toward the tiered seating, nearly bumping into him when he paused at the foot of the stairs, as if having second thoughts. She hugged him quickly from behind. “I don’t mind the front row if you’re not up to it.”

“No, I need to . . . *want* to do this.” He seemed to be assessing the path, as if planning how he’d tackle it. Finally, he said, “Go ahead of me. If I fall—which I shouldn’t—I don’t want to hurt you. And that way you can sit down without having to climb over me.”

“Maybe I’d like that,” Renee teased, then flushed red.

Kai smiled slyly, his lips pressed together, but said nothing, waiting for her to hop up a few stairs.

“How far?”

“Uh, give me a couple steps and I’ll let you know.”

Renee nodded, waiting patiently.

The steps were wide and close together in height, giving Kai room to place his crutches carefully, using them to help pull each leg up, one at a time. He managed his right fairly easily, but his left was more of a challenge, since it didn’t bend. But like everything Renee had observed this evening, Kai handled it, readjusting his crutches and right foot until he got the angle such he could pull his left leg up. His face showed his obvious concentration, but once he cleared a step, he’d look up and smile at her, a version of *her* smile, with a hint of that shy one he’d shown her earlier.

It continued to surprise her how sexy he was, no matter what he was doing. Whether it was something as simple as sitting beside her, reading, his golden hair falling in his face as he bent over a book, or working hard, as he was now, at something everyone else—even she—took for granted—her heart beat a little faster, doing its mini tango in her chest. She realized, even though she’d only known him since August, and only really gotten to know him over the past few weeks, that everything she was feeling about Kai could be condensed into one short word. Love. It had leaked out earlier by mistake, but she hadn’t really regretted it. The light, bubbly feeling in her stomach whenever she was near him. Knowing she wanted to be with him no matter what he was doing. Realizing how badly she was going to miss him next week while she was in New Orleans for the holiday.

Halfway up the steps to the fourth row he paused, not quite breathing hard, but obviously tired, leaning heavier on his crutches. He nudged his chin toward the row. “Go ahead and sit. I think this is good enough.” He flashed a smile, but it didn’t last.

She obeyed, easing into the row, but not taking a seat yet, watching as he leaned forward slightly, pushing hard against the floor with his crutches to pull his left leg up the final step. Then he shifted his crutches, twisting his torso and taking a cautious angled step with his right leg so he turned a few degrees, paused. His feet were now at strange angles, nearly perpendicular to each other, his left toes pointed toward his right heel. He planted his crutches one by one, again pulling his body to shift his left leg. Kai had positioned himself at about a thirty-degree angle to the row, facing the front. He eased one crutch, then his right foot into the row, then followed with the other crutch, using his upper body to get his left leg in place. Then he adjusted his weight,

shifting it to his left crutch, and slipped out of his right.

“Take it,” he said, offering it to her.

She did, surprised at how cool the metal felt in her hands, waiting for him to finish, figuring if he needed her help he’d ask for it, like he had just now with the crutch.

Kai cast a quick glance over his shoulder to check his position, his left hand gripping tightly on its handle, his knuckles white. He twisted, bending, his right hand reaching back for the armrest. It was a precarious moment, his right leg unlocked, and if he were going to fall, it’d be now. But he didn’t, bracing himself on the armrest with his right hand, using that arm to pull his body toward the seat. Once he was partially secure there, he released his grip on his left crutch handle in favor of the other armrest, finally sinking into the seat with a sigh. His right leg was bent, but his left lay straight, sticking out into the aisle. He removed his second crutch, stood it between his legs temporarily, the cuff balanced against the back of the next row of seats, then found the release for his left knee, unlocking the brace. He pulled on his jeans to maneuver his leg out of the path of the stairs, then offered Renee his second crutch.

Kai blew out a harsh breath, smiled at her. “Could you put that beside you? Just lean them together, or put them on top of the seats if no one needs to sit there.” He unzipped his coat and hurriedly pulled it off; his cheeks were flushed and he had to be hot, but she knew he’d adjusted his cuffs before he’d left to accommodate his jacket. For that and other reasons, it was easier for him to wait until he was sitting to remove it. He watched her position his crutches. “Don’t let them fall, if you can.”

Renee carefully checked that they were secure, adding in her own coat and his scarf to help keep them in place. “I don’t blame you; this floor is kind of sticky.”

Kai laughed lightly, then grabbed the armrests again to further adjust his body, pausing to manipulate a leg when it would catch. Probably a strap of his brace on the lip of the seat. “Whoever invented folding seats obviously didn’t have anything wrong with his legs or arms.” He leaned back and sighed, but he had a faint smile on his face. “Life with me will never be boring, I’ll promise you that.” He used his hands to stretch his legs out as far as the space would allow, grinned when she offered him his bottle of water. “I’m going to miss you next week,” he said, opening the bottle.

She watched him take a long drink, watching his Adam’s apple bob as he swallowed, eager to lean forward and kiss his neck. “I’m going to miss you, too.”

He smiled, set his water in the cup holder, and started massaging his hands, working his fingers into the palm of his opposite hand, then the knuckles, flexing his fingers. She wondered if he hurt after all that crutching, but she treasured this quiet moment with him, sitting together, the way he’d glance over at her fleetingly and flash a quick smile before looking back down at his hands. It occurred to Renee that she didn’t just love to be with him, she was proud. It was a strange feeling, since with the guys she usually dated, she always felt more like an accessory than a girlfriend, a status symbol, a cute face. Kai never made her feel like that—not that she didn’t think he found her beautiful; she knew he did. Instead, she felt more like equals, partners. Kai never assumed what she was thinking, what she wanted was what he wanted. It was evident the stares didn’t faze him, but he’d been cognizant that they might bother her. She’d brave the harshest looks to spend time with him, but the fact that he’d considered her feelings and desires meant something. Most guys she’d been with before dragged her along, not even aware she might think otherwise. Like Jude.

Renee’s thoughts were interrupted as a group of guys about their age wandered in, laughing and talking and whacking each other as they joked, jogging up the stairs.

They didn't look like the *Requiem for a Dream* type, and she wondered if *The 6th Day* was sold out and they'd heard there was sex and nudity in this film. When they reached the fourth row, they stopped, stared at Kai, apparently waiting for him to get up.

Renee saw Kai let out a long breath before tilting his head up to look at the three guys. "Look, it's not easy for me to stand up and sit back down, so could you go around?"

The three dudes glanced at each other, whispering as they noticed Kai's crutches, the hint of metal and plastic at his ankle, peeking out from the bottom of his pants. The one who seemed to be the leader rolled his shoulders, cracked his neck as he nudged it toward the front of the theater. "Crip seats are down there."

"Yes," Kai said, "and they suck. Go around. Or sit in another row. Don't be a jerk."

"Oh yeah?" the leader said, looking to his friends with a "watch this" look, then leaning forward and grabbing Kai's shirt. "Who's being the jerk here?"

Kai's eyes dropped to the guy's hands, but otherwise, he didn't move. "Don't touch me," he said, his voice level, though the threat was clear.

"Wait. I recognize you," the leader said, still gripping Kai's shirt.

Renee noticed Kai's eyes narrow, his lips press together, but otherwise, he was outwardly completely calm.

"You're that little spazzy retarded kid. Kyle?" The leader laughed, turned to his friends and started speaking in a mocking accent, imitating a deaf or mentally handicapped person's speech. "Ooh, look at me! I'm going to the movies! Ooh boy!" The leader continued to mock Kai to his friends, laughing, and he didn't notice when Kai reached up, grabbed each wrist, pressing his thumbs into the flesh, forcing the joker to let go with a howl of pain.

"I said, don't be a jerk," Kai hissed, shoving him back into his buddies, who had to scramble to catch each other to prevent all three of them from tumbling down the stairs in a heap.

Kai closed his eyes, took a few breaths, then turned to Renee, offering a slim smile. "You OK?"

Renee looked at him as if he were crazy, thinking, *Am I OK? Are you OK?*, but instead, she just nodded.

"Good," he said with his own nod, putting his arms up, linking his fingers and stretching his back and shoulders.

Renee watched as the three punks collected themselves, walking around to the other set of stairs, casting surreptitious glances at Kai while whispering to each other.

Finally, Kai lowered his arms, sighed cradled his neck, "In case it wasn't already obvious, I went to high school with those guys. I used to be small and scrawny, and I was just learning to speak, so I had a weird accent. Plus, sometimes, especially when I was nervous or stressed, my brain would get confused and I'd talk in a kind of oral ASL, which sounds like broken English. . . . Anyway, with the crutches and spasms and all that, let's just say I wasn't exactly the homecoming king."

Re shifted in her seat so she was almost sitting sideways, took one of his arms and hugged it. "Well, I like you just the way you are," she said, smiling. Then she pulled back to sign, kissing her fist and casting it downward, "*LOVE A-S-L.*"

Kai beamed. "*YOU LEARN-FAST.*"

She giggled. "I have a good teacher," she said while signing, "*YOU GOOD TEACHER.*"

Renee was practically dancing as she led the way out of the theater. Despite the darkness of the film, she was delightfully happy, spinning around every few feet to smile broadly back at him, clearly enjoying their time together. She didn't seem to care that people stared or taunted him—instead of being embarrassed by the harassment of his former high school classmates, she'd simply hugged his arm throughout most of the film, occasionally glancing at him with this enraptured look he couldn't believe was reserved for him.

“Oh, Kai, can we, please?” she squealed as she pointed to a photo booth, rushing up to it.

He joined her, staring at it. It was a bad idea for so many reasons. The most obvious being who knew how many germs the thing harbored, and second, the booth was tiny and cramped, not easy for a man his size to squeeze himself into even if he were able bodied. But Renee's eyes were filled with such pure childlike exuberance he didn't think he could stand to disappoint her.

“I mean, uh, if you think you can manage,” she said, deflating, apparently reading the hesitation in his eyes.

He sighed, though he kept it soft. “I can manage,” he said, offering her a sweet smile. “For you.” He took a moment to assess the situation, shifting his weight to one crutch so he could drop his hand out of his other and pull the curtain to the side. The space was small, but that could potentially be an advantage. He studied the angles one more time before slipping out of one crutch completely. “Hold this.”

He made sure he was balanced on his left side, then used his free hand to help lift his right foot forward, into the booth. He braced his hand on the wall, using that and his left crutch to help pull himself in and down onto the bench. He took a moment to catch his breath before slipping out of his left crutch and guiding his other leg in, unlocking the brace.

Renee peeked in, beaming pure sunshine rays of happiness, accepting his second crutch, since there didn't appear to be any room for him to lean them in the booth. He watched her propping them against the outside wall, which made him nervous.

Perhaps she sensed his anxiety, so she smiled. “No one is going to take them, Kai. We'll only be a few minutes.”

Of course, Renee had no way to know that had happened to him before, more than once, and with his high school “buddies” possibly still loose in the theater, perhaps bent on revenge after he humiliated them. . . . But Renee was right. It was only a few minutes, and he didn't really have a choice.

“Just . . . angle them so I can see the tips below the curtain. Please.”

Another woman might have protested, or accused him of being paranoid, but one look in Renee's eyes told him that she understood, and so instead of leaving them outside, she climbed in, carefully sandwiching them between the front and back walls, angled, the tips under the bench. Since Kai was so tall, they just barely fit, and it meant they blocked the doorway, but they were inside, and with the curtain drawn back, would be impossible to filch surreptitiously.

He couldn't begin to express the relief that swept over him, but thankfully, he didn't have to. She simply kissed him, refusing to let him pay for the photos. “They were my idea after all.”

She settled into his lap, and he held her waist as she added money to the

machine. “Ready?” She laughed and kissed him on the cheek just as the camera started clicking away, and he looked at her, and she looked at him, and they both smiled as he realized as big a pain as the booth was, it was worth it, to see her smiling at him like that.

“So, what did you think of the movie?” Kai asked. They were settled in a quiet back corner of The Chipped Mug, the little coffee shop near campus where they’d met way back at the beginning of the semester so Renee could give Kai a copy of her notes. It felt like forever ago, even though it had only been a few months.

“It was . . . intense,” Renee hedged, sipping her coffee. She was curled up in a chair, her feet tucked up, but Kai sat across from her, his long legs stretched out, slouched slightly, looking tired, his crutches leaning against the wall within easy reach, his coat and scarf in his lap. Initially, he’d opted for a hot chocolate, but after a second’s contemplation had changed it to herbal tea. He’d explained that caffeine made him jittery (even in small amounts), and that for most of his life he’d taken a drug—theophylline—that was related to caffeine, so it was dangerous to combine them. As a result, he’d grown up not drinking anything caffeinated, and even though technically he could drink those things now, it was partially habit and partially not liking the way the drug made him feel—restless and agitated.

Kai laughed. “I take it you never read the book.”

“And you have, of course.”

Kai shrugged. “A couple times. It’s pretty brilliantly crafted.”

Renee smiled. “So tell me about it, Professor Fox, because honestly, I was lost in the chaos.”

Kai chuckled. “Basically, it’s a comment on the ideal of the American dream, and how all these characters were trying to achieve it, but instead of doing so through hard work and sacrifice, they each took drugs as a shortcut. And that, of course, led to their downfalls.”

“Wow,” Renee said, sitting up a little straighter. “I never would have gotten that.”

Kai shrugged. “Growing up Deaf, I don’t know much about music, but a ‘requiem’ is a song for the dead. So the book is basically saying how the American dream is dead. It’s a myth that can’t be achieved. At least that’s my interpretation of it, and you probably already know my cynic meter is pretty high.”

Renee let this sink in a moment. “Wow,” she said again when no other words would come to her. “That totally puts the movie in a new light. Remind me to make sure I take my required lit course with you.”

Kai smiled shyly, visibly uncomfortable with the praise, a rare show of emotion he normally would have hid. “Jon’s the smart brother. I’m the handsome one,” he said with a self-mocking grin, trying to take control of the conversation again and making light.

“You are handsome,” Renee said with a flirtatious smile. “But you’re also smart, Kai. Like your makeup paper. I could never have written anything like that.”

His face twitched, like he couldn’t decide on an emotion, before hiding it in his cup as he sipped some tea.

“You’re also pretty awesome, the way you handled those jerks in the theater.”

Kai shrugged.

“Really. You were all ninja cool.”

That made Kai laugh, a sudden, sharp sound. “In high school, I did break a guy’s nose with my crutches once.”

Renee rolled her eyes, but she was smiling, wishing she were closer, laying her head on one of his strong shoulders. “I don’t think I’d believe that coming from anyone else but you.” Renee shifted in her seat, set her coffee aside, then attempted to sign, fingerspelling the last word, since she didn’t know the sign for it, “*You make me feel safe.*”

Kai smiled faintly, but sweetly, demonstrating the sign for “safe”: arms crossed at the wrist in front of his body, then breaking apart, away from him.

“*SINCE LONG TIME I DON’T FEEL SAME,*” Renee signed, hoping that meant what she’d intended: she hadn’t felt like that—safe—in a long time. Not like she did with Kai.

Apparently it was enough Kai understood her. “*I’m sorry.*” He set his drink aside, then continued, all in sign, slowing down for her sake, “*It’s silly, but you make me feel safe, too.*” His shy smile reappeared again.

Renee’s heart swelled, not only because she’d understood him, but because of what he said.

Renee clutched Kai’s crutches as he propelled himself into her apartment, letting the momentum take him into a slight glide before executing a smooth turn to face her, smiling. “After all that walking, this feels wonderful,” he said, spinning around once, making Renee laugh. “You sure you want me to spend the night?”

She nodded, approaching him, taking one of his hands and placing it on her hip.

Kai checked her eyes before letting his palm slide along her curves, up toward her breasts, then down to her ass.

“I want you to stay,” she said, her voice breathy as he caressed her, though he was cautious, keeping his hands on top of her clothes, watching her eyes for any sign of panic or fear. “I want to spend every last minute I can with you.” Her voice hitched as he teased her nipples. He wouldn’t push her, but oh, God, if he could touch her, taste her, have her touch him. . . .

His cock strained against his jeans. He’d taken his meds earlier, but he still had his braces on, though he’d settle for a quick hand job at this point. Anything to lessen the chance Renee might change her mind.

“Diane’s already gone home, so we have the place to ourselves,” Renee added, squirming beneath his touch, her face delightfully flushed, her lips pursed and head tilted back just a bit.

“Mmm,” he said, drawing her closer, spreading her legs so she stood over his, lifting the hem of her sweater to expose her pale belly, planting kisses there. “Let me make you feel good, Re,” Kai said between kisses.

She didn’t respond immediately, but one of her hands fisted his hair and she arched into his touch as he teased lower, one hand supporting her, the other still tickling at one of her nipples.

She let out a sigh and pulled away, so he immediately stopped, his head foggy, his cock and balls aching, but he forced himself to focus. He’d made her a promise, and even if it drove him insane with frustrated lust, he’d keep it.

“We don’t have to do anything except sleep,” he said when he couldn’t read her face.

She nodded, leading him toward her bedroom. He followed.

Renee's bedroom was more or less what you'd expect for a 19-year-old college girl, feminine but practical and tidy. A small desk and a queen-sized bed dominated the room, but Kai noticed a couple rugs rolled up and stacked in a far corner—she'd given this thought. That was good, because he didn't want her to freak out and shut down on him as she had the other night, even if they did just sleep together.

She laid his crutches against the wall, then approached him, tugging at his shirt. He smiled, reached back and pulled it over his head, loving the way her eyes lit up with appreciation and lust at the sight of his bare chest. Loving how he didn't need to hide it from her anymore.

She dragged a finger along his shoulder and collarbone, using it to lift up the chain of his medical ID jewelry. "Do you sleep with this?"

Kai nodded. He didn't like to, but not wearing it while he was sleeping defeated the purpose. His breathing shifted as she teased his skin, following the chain, tracing his scars. "Re, my braces—"

She shushed him with a kiss, leaning forward, a hand sliding over his thigh, not quite reaching his crotch, but close, making him melt, his breathing quick and fast. Her fingers curled along the top strap of his braces, bunching the fabric of his jeans. Kissing him more hungrily, pulling a long, low moan from somewhere deep in his chest.

Finally, she stepped back, smiling, looking almost relieved, which confused his lust-addled brain initially until he realized she might be glad Jude wasn't ruining another chance for them to be together. She patted the bed.

Taking this as his cue, Kai pulled himself onto it; not the easiest feat since it was higher than he was used to and the mattress soft, but he managed, finally. He noticed Renee was watching as she began to shyly slip off her shoes.

He smiled at her, then proceeded to remove his own shoes, relieved when she accepted them and set them aside, out of the way. Her fingers may have lingered a little longer than necessary on the footplate, tracing up along his foot toward his ankle. Normally, he didn't like his feet to be touched; they spasmed really easily, the arch particularly painful, but he didn't want to say anything to ruin the mood. She wasn't just OK with the hardware; like his scars, she accepted and maybe even loved (as crazy as that was!) them because they were part of who he was.

Once she was back within his reach, he pulled her close, forcefully, but sure to grip her loose enough she could escape if she wanted to. Yes, he wanted to fuck her, the primal part of his brain raging, but more than that, he wanted to make this good for her, to forever erase any memories of the man who had hurt her. To make her sigh and moan with pleasure until she looked over at him through half-lidded eyes, a content, satisfied smile on her face.

To make her feel safe.

So he kissed her, losing himself in her mouth, her tongue still tasting faintly of coffee. After a few minutes, he gently broke the kiss, placing a peck on her nose, his thumb smoothing her cheek.

"I'll need time to take off my braces," Kai reminded her. "And we won't do anything you aren't comfortable with."

Renee nodded again, stepped back, and adorably, snagged some pajamas out of her closet and disappeared into the bathroom. Kai wasn't sure if she was giving him space or if she needed it herself, but he didn't waste too much time thinking about it, slipping his jeans off one hip at a time, sliding them down to his knees. He reached into

his boxers and gave his hard, leaking cock a few quick tugs, grazing the palm of his hand over the head. If Renee wanted to keep things relatively platonic, he was going to need a few minutes first. He groaned as he returned to his task, reaching down to yank off his pants the rest of the way.

He heard water running in the bathroom, like she was brushing her teeth, as he hurriedly worked to undo the myriad straps that kept each leg in place. Leather was a pain in the ass, but it fit better and was more comfortable than Velcro and plastic, especially around his bad left knee. He was grateful to be walking again, but he had become a little spoiled by the relatively brace-free past few weeks.

Soon, he'd freed his legs, straightening and locking each brace before leaning them against the wall, not far from where Renee had left his crutches. Thank God for long arms.

His feet were spasming as he rolled off his brace socks, as if in protest of having used them all evening, and Renee still hadn't reemerged, so he pulled himself back and began his stretching routine.

Renee stared at herself in the mirror for a long time, water dripping from her chin. She'd wanted this, planned for it, even, but was she really ready? In her mind, the idea of having sex with Kai for the first time before she left for Thanksgiving would be a lovely way to keep him with her—in a manner of speaking—all week long. He'd been exactly what she'd needed last week, when she'd wanted him, desperately, yet the shadow of Jude had left her sobbing in his arms. How he stopped, cold, like throwing on an emergency brake, at the slightest hint of hesitation or fear from her. And his touch was so wonderful—not the harsh, impatient grip of Jude or some of the other men she'd been with, but instead, delicate, tender, loving.

Still, the way his eyes darkened with lust set her pulse racing, and not due to arousal. She trusted Kai on an intellectual level, but still . . . her body didn't.

Renee dried her face and stared down her reflection one last time. They'd napped together more than once, and she'd even been OK lying skin to skin, both shirtless. Maybe it was too soon for sex sex, but that didn't mean they couldn't fool around. And the prospect of seeing Kai totally naked. . . . Which, she realized, meant a lot. He wore his clothes in a size too big to hide his body, and he'd only bared his chest to her after great reluctance, as a sign of trust. Renee smiled, built up her courage, and adjusted the straps of the negligee she'd picked out for the purpose. Totally impractical for a mid-November Iowan night, but that just meant she'd have to cling closer to Kai to keep warm.

Renee eased back into the bedroom. Kai lay on his side, partially under the covers, his chest rising and falling in slow, even breaths. As she drew nearer, she could see his eyes were shut, his golden lashes fluttering endearingly, his lips pursed.

She couldn't help the flare of disappointment that hit her as she shut off all but her nightstand light and climbed in on the opposite side of the bed. But his eyes opened when he felt the mattress shift, smiling a sweet, if tired grin. Lopsided. "Her" smile.

"Sleepy?"

He nodded. "Walking is hard work," he said, reaching for her. "But I can stay up a little longer if you want to play."

She laughed, any unease she had melting away. Kai still had his boxers on, but otherwise, was completely free of clothing, looking more relaxed than she'd ever seen him before. Comfortable, like they slept together every night instead of this being their

first time.

She knee-walked closer, sinking down onto her calves, smoothing her hand along the angle of his hip, onto his thigh. She couldn't explain why she found the stillness of his legs—except for the occasional minor involuntary twitch—so arousing. Maybe because it was Kai, and she loved—yes, loved—everything about him. She danced her hand inward, toward the flap of his boxers.

Her fingers slipped inside, gently teasing the skin of his cock, making it jerk and him sigh. He used his hands to shift his body so he lay on his back, his legs spread to give her access, pulling her hand to him again, rubbing him now through the fabric of his underwear.

“I should take care of you first,” he said, his words halting. “If I come, I’ll fall asleep.”

Renee giggled, stroked him a few more times before moving back on the bed.

He pushed himself up so he was sitting again, then back against the headboard. He removed his boxers, first by pressing up on one side to lift his hip, yanking the fabric down, then repeating for the other side. She helped him slide them off the rest of the way, loving the feel of his long legs, coated in a light dusting of hair, beneath her palms; the way he sighed softly as she did this.

“I love how tall you are,” Renee said, almost to herself.

He chuckled softly, pulled one of his legs up with his hands so she could ease his boxers off completely.

It was strange, yet oddly erotic to help him slip his underwear over each foot, more obvious now than ever that Kai had no control over them. He had beautiful feet, too: large, but narrow, with long toes that curled slightly, whether naturally or from spasms that held them there, she wasn't sure. Tossing his boxers aside, Renee carefully set each foot down, giving into the urge to smooth her hands over the bridge of each. Her thumbs snaked under his arches, and she could feel tension there, though she kept her touch light. His face betrayed nothing, but his eyes held a wariness barely shrouded by his obvious arousal, his breathing rapid.

His cock was completely different from Jude's, the skin a pale pink only slightly darker than his body, perfectly proportional to his tall, slim frame: long, but not too thick, uncut, resting against the angle of his hip, the base covered in a nest of dark gold hair. She'd never seen someone as blond as Kai completely naked before, and she found herself transfixed. He really was blond *everywhere*. She licked her lips unconsciously. She could hardly believe he was offering to take care of her before himself. Jude had never really cared about her pleasure.

“What do you like?” he asked, beckoning her closer.

She felt herself blush. “I . . . like when you touch me,” she said, embarrassed to say more.

Kai guided her into his lap, having her straddle one thigh. “Good thing I like touching you.” He ghosted his lips along her arm, his fingers dancing over her exposed skin, making her tingle. His hands roamed to her hair, smoothing the curls between his fingers. He did so gently, reverently, as if he were conscious that unlike straight hair, pulling them through would be painful and destroy their integrity. His breath was hot against the edge of her ribs. “I love your hair,” he whispered.

His hand lingered in her curls before arching down her neck, her chest, her stomach, her thighs, his touch leaving a fire in its wake. Kai eased the smooth fabric of her nightgown up and over her legs, higher, higher, exposing her belly, then her breasts,

bending forward to kiss and lick her skin. “Say stop any time you want me to, and I will,” he reminded her again, before sliding her negligee off the rest of the way, leaving her exposed.

His eyes flashed with hunger, which made her pulse race, but she didn’t stop him. She reminded herself she *wanted* this, that Kai wouldn’t hurt her. Kai pressed her closer, blowing hot breath on her nipple before taking it in his mouth, rolling it on his tongue, then sucking softly.

She let out a short whimper, gripping his shoulder, her eyes falling shut as she sank into the pleasure. While his mouth focused on one breast, his hand found the other, and soon she was moaning and writhing against him, desperate for more sensation.

He chuckled, but then groaned when her hand wrapped around his cock, sliding up and down the skin. He pulled back so he could speak, “Oh, Re, that feels so good.” He let her stroke him awhile, but then he pulled her hand away and lifted her off his lap. Gesturing for her to lie on her side, he soon mimicked her pose. His cock had grown even harder and larger, the foreskin stretched around the shaft now, the head, deeply flushed, unmasked, beads of precome collecting on the tip. Fully erect, he was much longer than Jude; suddenly, he looked enormous and terrifying, and a flare of panic overtook her. Renee pressed her hands against his chest, desperate to keep him away, though she knew, even without being able to really move his legs, he could easily take her if he wanted to.

“Not inside me. Not today. I’m not ready,” she said in a rush.

“Shh,” he said, sliding his hand along her arm to calm her. “I know. Just my fingers, if that’s OK? You’ll like it.”

Renee felt herself shudder. But Kai’s hands were grounding, tenderly stroking the skin of her side and hip, giving her a chance to decide. She found his eyes, saw him smile faintly at her, knew his words weren’t hollow. “OK,” she said in a small voice, spreading her legs for him.

Kai spoke softly to her as he arranged her carefully, one leg between his, so that if she bucked, she’d rub against his cock, her chest close enough to his mouth he could resume his attention to her nipples. He kissed the skin between her breasts, cradling her body firmly but tenderly. She let out a soft sigh, and he laughed into her skin, which drew up goose bumps and tightened her nipples, making her desperate.

“More,” she found herself demanding.

Without a word, Kai took a nipple in his mouth, and as soon as she felt the moist heat of his tongue on her breasts, she began sinking away again, letting out a moan of pleasure when she felt his fingers first tease, then gently slip inside her. She worked her leg hard into him, loving the pressure of his cock against her and his fingers inside her, his thumb tickling her clit while his tongue laved her nipple. She was floating, more in tune with her body than she’d ever felt before, and yet somehow apart from it, tightness coiling in her belly. His fingers moved faster as he nibbled gently on her nipple. Just when she thought she’d burst, her orgasm hit her, powerful and loud, a scream she would never have recognized as her own escaping her lips, leaving her boneless and trembling on the bed beside him. But he held her firmly in his arms, and though it was like falling, she felt secure. Safe.

Her leg, where she’d been pressing into him, was hot and sticky, but when she managed to recover herself, she realized he’d taken his arms off her. One hand was sliding over his length, his head back, reaching for his own orgasm. She’d never watched

a guy touch himself before, and honestly, if someone had asked her if she'd like it, she would have responded with a disgusted and firm "No!" But Kai was so hot right now, long, lean body stretched out on her bed, eyes closed, pulling on his cock, the skin sliding with his movements.

She saw his stomach jerking; he was close, so she pushed his hand away and struggled to mimic him, focusing on the head. He was watching her, a mixture of amazement and arousal in his eyes, his hand on his belly. She squeezed the tip experimentally and his whole body seemed to jerk as he let out a low groan that immediately made her wet again.

"Don't stop; I'm so close," Kai begged, his eyes tightly shut now.

She smiled, pulled her thumb over the slit, which drew out a whine before she pumped harder a few more times. Her arm was sore, but she wanted to be the one to make him come, to give him pleasure the way he had for her.

She twisted her grip as she passed over the tip once, twice, three times. That seemed to push him over the edge, because suddenly, he grunted, his body grew stiff, his skin from collarbone to crown breaking out in a flush, his mouth dropping open, almost in surprise. With a few jerking spasms, he shot over her hand and onto his chest and stomach, one, two, three, four, five jets of come, until he let out a whoosh of air and grew still. God, he was strangely beautiful when he came.

"Oh, fuck, Re. I needed that. Thank you."

It surprised her how incredibly turned on she was, watching him lying there, white pooling on his stomach, his eyes struggling to stay open, a hand with his long fingers resting on his belly, his cock still half hard between his legs.

She reached over for a tissue, then wiped them both clean, not resisting the urge to plant tender, wet kisses over his belly and chest, as if to mark where each splash of come had been. Her kisses made him shiver and sigh, and when she'd pause between each to glance up at his face, she'd see his eyes half-lidded, smiling, sweet and sated. Yet another smile she'd never seen before, and perhaps a new favorite. His skin was warm and salty, his natural scent strong, mixed with sex and musk, his usual "clean" smell of soap just below the surface. She trailed up to his clavicles, teasing licks and tiny pecks tracing the outline of bone that led to the scar he hated so much. Just beside it, she sucked gently, and he arched into her touch subtly, letting out a foreign sound of shocked pleasure.

She chuckled with satisfaction and snuggled up beside him, draping a leg over one of his as she continued to kiss him, enjoying how he let his head loll to one side to expose more of his neck to her ministrations. She paused, shocked when she felt his legs spasming actively against her.

Before she could say anything, he explained, "Coming sometimes sets off spasms, but it's worth it," he said, his voice heavy with sleep, rolling his neck so he could smile up at her. Sweet, content, as if he had everything he could possibly want right here in front of him. He blinked, and for a moment she saw that beautiful gaze shadow before his lids fell. He was exhausted.

But Renee couldn't sleep just yet, her mind racing. Lying naked in her bed, in the semi darkness, with a man whom she'd just had sex with (even if wasn't sex sex) should have left her feeling hollow, empty, guilty, used, and a myriad of other negative emotions. Instead, she felt surprisingly peaceful. Content. The only damper on it the fierce ache in her chest of how terribly she'd miss Kai over the next week. Of how much she loved lying here in his embrace, secure and warm.

She stole a quick kiss, savoring the taste of his mouth now, before gathering the covers and wrapping them both up, turning on the heated blanket and draping herself over him, needing to be as close to him as possible.

“What are you going to do this week?” she asked him.

He didn’t answer right away, and for a moment, she feared he’d fallen asleep. But finally, he replied, his voice slow and drowsy, “Take you to the airport tomorrow, then go swimming. My first time since I hurt my leg.”

“I didn’t know you swam.”

He chuckled, which turned into a yawn. “This sexy body doesn’t come free.”

She knew he was being self deprecating, but she couldn’t help smoothing her hand from his knee up his thigh, onto his belly, stopping just at the base of his sternal scar. His legs were coated in dark golden hair, but his chest was almost hairless, and his arms had only a faint dusting of hair so blond it was nearly invisible. “I know you don’t think so, but you are sexy. I love your long legs, your belly, your arms, your hair, your eyes, your scars. . . .”

He made a strange sound, like a stifled laugh, like he was going to say something else sardonic but stopped himself. Instead, he continued, as if he hadn’t been interrupted, though his sentences were abbreviated, like a telegram, punctuated by yawns, “David’s on Tuesday, see if I fit in his house. Time with Jon, and maybe my friend Jake. Nothing too exciting,” he said, his voice fading. “Hope Deaf Thanksgiving won’t have too many people. Don’t want wear mask all day.” Kai sighed, nudged her away so he could shift onto his side, reaching down to adjust his legs.

Renee kissed his chest, drew the blankets up closer around them. “My family has a dressing contest every year.”

Kai laughed, a low chuckle. “Like a fashion contest?”

Now it was Renee’s turn to laugh. “No. Cooking. Dressing is stuffing. But not in a turkey. A bunch of my family members make their own recipe and then we all vote for the best one.”

Kai pulled her closer. She could feel his legs still twitching subtly, though they had begun to calm. “Stuffing different kind? Didn’t know.” It surprised her how much she loved the sound of his voice when he was sleepy, his grammar growing strange and his pronunciation becoming less crisp, softer.

“Oh, every kind you can possibly imagine. Dressing is a **big** deal in New Orleans.” She sighed. “I’d make you some, but I don’t really want to be responsible for the next biohazard disaster.”

He didn’t laugh, and she realized, tuning into the sound of his breath, not quite a snore, that he’d fallen asleep. She laughed to herself at how he could fall asleep so abruptly. His legs kicked subtly, and so she wrapped her own around his to help still them.

“I could get used to this,” she whispered.

He could have taken her, any time, but he hadn’t. She knew, based on how hard he’d come, how badly he’d wanted her, but he’d been willing to stop, just as he’d promised. And he hadn’t *fucked* her, the way Jude or others had. He had made love to her, a phrase she’d always found silly and incomprehensible. It was strange to think the “L” word so soon, but tonight—that had been love—she’d felt it—and she knew by the way he held her and looked at her that he’d felt it, too.

November 18, 2000

Jon sat on the floor, a pile of colored blocks in front of him, Kai sitting on the other side of the pile, watching Jon intently with those bright blue eyes.

Jon picked up one of the blocks, showing it to Kai with one hand while he signed with the other. “*COLOR?*”

Kai smiled his toddler grin and waved his little hand in the air. “*BLUE!*”

Jon smiled, nodded. “*GOOD.*” Kai reached out for the block, so Jon offered it to him.

Kai waved the blue block in the air, tapped his chin with his bent middle finger. “*FAVORITE.*”

Jon’s smile broadened as he selected another from the group. “*COLOR RED?*” Jon asked, trying to remember what he’d read, about raising your eyebrows to signal a yes/no question.

Kai shook his head, the blue block still in one hand. “*YELLOW,*” he signed, pointing.

“*Yes. That’s right.*” Jon pushed the pile to the side to clear some floor space, then laid out an assortment of blocks on the floor. “*GREEN. WHICH?*”

Kai studied the blocks for a moment before picking the correct one, then looking up for Jon’s approval, bursting into a huge grin when he realized he was right.

“*Come here,*” Jon signed, opening his arms.

Kai could walk, kind of, with braces and a walker, but that was new to him. Instead, Kai still preferred to crawl on his belly, using his arms to shimmy along the floor like a soldier, since he could do so surprisingly quickly. Once he got closer, Jon scooped him up, holding him in his lap and giving him a big hug, planting a kiss on the top of his brother’s head. Kai hugged Jon too before pulling back so he could sign.

“*LOVE YOU.*”

“*SAME.*”

Suddenly, the rumble of the garage sounded, and Kai started patting Jon’s shoulder impatiently, beaming. “*Daddy! Daddy’s home!*”

Jon laughed, cradled Kai closer, and pushed his way to his feet, still carrying his brother. Despite the fact that Kai’s health had been dramatically better the past year, he was still tiny, in only the tenth percentile for his age, looking more like an overgrown baby than a three-year-old. Jon shifted Kai in his arms so his brother could see better when their father entered, Kai practically vibrating with excitement when Bryan walked in the door, looking exhausted.

But Bryan brightened upon seeing his sons, smiling and signing enthusiastically to Kai, “*MY FAVORITE BOY. WHO?*”

Kai pointed to himself, waving his arms for Bryan to take him, and Jon knew if Kai could have, he’d be squealing. Bryan accepted Kai, gave Jon a firm pat on the shoulder and a nod, before hugging Kai tight and kissing him.

“*TODAY YOU LEARN WHAT?*” Bryan asked Kai, single-handedly. Bryan only knew a little sign language, but he seemed to master more of it every day, doing his best to talk to Kai in it as much as possible.

“*Color practice. All correct,*” Kai signed proudly with a firm nod.

“Dad,” Jon said, using his voice for the first time in awhile.

Bryan kissed Kai again and shifted him onto his side, doing his best to pay

attention to Jon, too.

“He knows all his colors, the alphabet, basic shapes and animals. He’s smart, Dad. I’ve been reading about CP, and I don’t think—” Jon was interrupted by Ann, his mother, bursting suddenly into the room.

“You said you were working late tonight!”

Jon watched his father contain his sigh, cradle Kai against him, who had laid his head on his father’s shoulder and looked ready for a nap. “Boss said I’ve been doing too much overtime, so he sent me home. Figured I could spend some time with my family.” Bryan rocked Kai in his arms, twisting at the hip back and forth, back and forth. Kai looked especially small in their father’s embrace, since Bryan was such a large man, and Jon wondered if he’d ever be that big. He was tall for his age, almost the tallest in his class, but definitely scrawny, though Bryan promised Jon that would change when he got older.

“You mean spend time with your sons.”

This time, Bryan did sigh. “Last time I checked, my sons were my family.”

Ann groaned in annoyed frustration, stomped away, and a moment later, Kai jumped when the master bedroom door slammed shut loudly.

“Dad, I don’t think they have Kai’s diagnosis right. I don’t think he even has cerebral palsy—”

“Later, Jon.” It was always “later.” “OK? I’m sorry.” He handed Kai back, who resisted the transfer initially, clinging to his father’s shirt. “Shh. Kai, it’s OK. Jon will take care of you. I’ll be right back.” He kissed Kai again, who finally released his grip, accepting Jon’s embrace.

“Talk to mom at least, please?” Jon begged.

Bryan nodded, squeezed Jon’s shoulder again, and disappeared into his bedroom.

Jon carried Kai to the kitchen. “*HUNGRY?*”

Kai shook his head. Kai was never hungry.

Jon sighed and helped Kai into his highchair, which they still used because he was so small, and started prepping something that maybe Kai would swallow and keep down. He was sitting in front of Kai a few minutes later, trying to convince Kai to eat a few bites of mashed chicken and applesauce, when their parents fighting became loud enough to leak through the thin walls.

“This is different, Bryan!”

“How? We talked about sending Kai to that home in Council Bluffs, but that was before we thought he’d ever breathe on his own.”

“He’s too much for me to handle. You’re not here all day. You don’t have to deal with him.”

“Forgive me for working my ass off! All I ask is for you to take care of my children and my house, and you can’t even do that! Jon is 11, goes to school full time, and he does more around here than you.”

*“That’s not fair. That’s **not** fair! You’re invalidating me and you know the doctor said—”*

“So you only listen to the doctor when it works in your favor.”

“I’m just saying consider it. This place—County House—it’s close. We could visit him—”

“No. No fucking way.”

“He’s not going to get better. He’s never going to walk on his own. He’s never

going to talk. He might even need to go back on the breathing machine. He's going to need someone to take care of him for the rest of his life."

Jon wasn't sure how much English Kai understood, but Jon knew, despite common assumptions—and his current diagnosis, diplegic spastic cerebral palsy with mental retardation—Kai wasn't stupid. He had to know, even if he couldn't fully comprehend everything their parents were saying, that they were fighting about him. After all, Ann and Bryan fought constantly, and Kai was a recurring topic.

"Mommy Daddy fight," Kai said, frowning deeply.

"I know. Three more bites, then I'll read you a story."

Kai smiled and scooped some food into his mouth, getting most of it on his face.

Despite the fact that their parents were still fighting, Jon laughed. "You need to get it in your mouth," Jon said aloud, then opened his mouth and pointed inside. "Remember to swallow," Jon added, gesturing on his throat and doing an exaggerated swallow. Kai had needed therapy to learn how to eat and swallow; one doctor said it was because of his CP, another, because he'd been on a respirator and feeding tube for so long during his first two years.

"He's my son, Ann! I'm not sending him anywhere!"

Jon heard a crash that made Kai jump and begin to cry. Sounded like Ann was throwing things. Again. He sighed, gave up on feeding Kai any more, and pulled him out of the highchair. "Shh, shh," Jon cooed, cradling Kai close, hoping he could calm him before his tears turned to wheezes.

*"Oh, but you would send **me** away?"*

"If you're going to act like a crazy bitch—"

Another crash, this time louder, and Kai trembled in Jon's arms, crying more intensely, his breath beginning to skip and jerk, so Jon maneuvered toward their shared bedroom so he could get a nebulizer treatment ready, speaking softly and encouragingly to Kai the whole time.

"It's OK, Kai. You're safe. I'll keep you safe. Always."

Jon's eyes shot open in the dark, breathing heavily, struggling to get his bearings. He pushed himself up, finally recognizing Vicky's sleeping form beside him as the remnants of his dream faded into reality. He was in Vicky's bed. He'd spent the night.

The clock indicated it was just after two. Jon sighed, shoved his hand through his hair. Glancing at Vicky one last time, knowing he wouldn't be able to sleep anymore, he silently pushed himself out of bed and slipped into the main room, heading for the kitchen. Maybe a cup of tea would settle his mind.

Jon paced restlessly, though, as he waited for the water to boil. Jon hadn't dreamed about Kai as a child, or their parents, in years, but ever since Vicky had broken the news of her pregnancy, the dreams had hit him nearly every time he closed his eyes.

Passionate, hateful fights between his parents he'd forced himself to forget until now. Thank God Kai had no recollection of them. How ironic that he'd ended up at County House anyway.

Vicky slowly crept into the living room. She could see Jon, sitting on the couch, his head back, either asleep or staring at the ceiling. She hoped, as she drew closer, he had fallen asleep again, but she knew better. Jon rarely managed more than a few hours' rest at once, but in the past couple weeks, things had been worse. At first, he'd insisted it was

merely that his body clock was messed up from his erratic work schedule, but finally he'd admitted the truth.

She laid a gentle hand on his shoulder. His eyes opened, but he'd been awake. She could tell by how alert he was. "The dreams again?"

Jon swallowed, nodded.

Vicky sunk down onto the couch beside him, offering her arms. He settled into them with a weary sigh. "You're not like your mom," Vicky assured him. "If that's what you're worried about. If anyone, you're more like your father."

Jon cradled her arms around him. "What if . . . what if our baby isn't healthy?" Jon's voice was a whisper, barely audible. "The inheritance of FS and MLS is unknown, and I don't know enough of my family's history—"

Vicky shushed him with a kiss on his crown. "You'll love our child no matter what. I know that. For his sake, we'll just have to hope he's healthy. That's all we can do. There's no use worrying about possibilities that may not even come to pass. You'll drive yourself insane." She kissed his temple, the shell of his ear. *I love you*, she thought, but she kept the words to herself. It wasn't the right time. Still, she felt joy that Jon sank into her embrace, cherishing her comfort, accepting her support.

He laughed hollowly. "You know, I've talked with you more about my parents than I have with Kai?" Jon sighed. "I just . . . he doesn't remember them. At all. His only memories are those that I've shared with him. I don't want him to have another burden. Our father loved him, but our mother . . ."

Jon trembled, and she wasn't sure if it was from cold or a remnant of his dream.

"Let's go back to bed," Vicky said, kissing his temple again. "I'll see what I can do about helping you fall back asleep," she whispered, voice hot in his ear.

Renee woke before her alarm. The bedside light was still on, and she could hear a faint, wheezy snore from beside her. Turning in the bed, she saw Kai, sprawled on his side, his legs tangled awkwardly in the sheets, apparently deep asleep. She watched him for a few minutes, his blond lashes fluttering subtly, his skin so pale and smooth over the muscles of his shoulder. How could he not see how handsome he was? How sexy? Even the scars only enhanced his beauty, she thought.

He shifted, just slightly, but it was enough to send a lock of hair from the top of his head across his face, and she wasn't able to resist the urge to nudge it away, the tips of her fingers just barely grazing his forehead. He murmured, almost a hum, and she heard his breathing change, then, with a slow kind of blink, his eyes opened. For a fraction of a second, he was confused, but when recognition hit, a sleepy, contented smile lifted his cheeks.

"Morning."

"Morning," he echoed. His voice was scratchy. He blinked lazily. "Time?"

"Early still," Renee said, tracing a finger over the arch of his shoulder.

He shivered. "God, Re," he said, his voice a breathy whisper.

She smiled, satisfied at the effect she was having on him, dragging her finger down his arm, onto his ribs, toward his waist.

He sighed, a small, satisfied sound. His eyes struggled to trace her path before giving up and lifting to hers, deep blue in the dim light. He signed something, awkwardly, with one hand, and she wasn't sure if she would have understood it even if his signing had been textbook, his posture perfect.

He let out a faint laugh, coughed, recovered, then looked back at her with that same lovestruck expression she never would have believed would be a look a real person could give another. “You make it all worth it.”

She shook her head, eyebrows furrowed.

Kai shifted enough to trace his own finger on her skin, bring up delightful gooseflesh; she could spend all day, all week, all year lying in bed with him if he’d touch her and look at her like this. “Do you know the song ‘God Bless The Broken Road’?”

Renee arched her shoulders as he dragged his finger along her neck, but managed a head shake. “I thought you were Deaf.”

Kai chuckled. “Jon bought me a CD player, and music, when. . . .” He cleared his throat. “I listened to a lot of music when I was waiting for my transplant. I hadn’t had much exposure to it before that.”

Kai pulled her closer to him, and she let him; they wrapped their arms around each other, warm bodies, bare skin pressed to bare skin. She felt his arousal between them, but he didn’t push her toward sex; he simply cradled her, secure, as if she were the most precious thing he had ever held.

“You’re not going to make me sing, are you?” He chuckled, coughed again, and planted a kiss on the top of her head.

“And if I asked you to, would you?”

She felt his warm breath on her scalp, like he was savoring her scent. “I’d do anything for you, Re.”

Despite what they’d done the night before, Renee hadn’t been quite ready for sharing the shower. True to his character, Kai hadn’t pushed her, and after using the bathroom quickly, had yielded it to her on the promise of coffee and breakfast when she finished. It seemed so unfair, she thought, as she pulled on her traveling clothes—layers so she wouldn’t melt when she arrived in the much more temperate climate of New Orleans in a few hours—that right when everything between them seemed to have reached this pinnacle of perfection, she had to leave. Seven days—an entire week—without Kai seemed like an eternity.

When she emerged, the aroma of fresh-brewed coffee and eggs hit her nose. Kai was at the stove, his chair angled so he could see the pan he was cooking in.

“Coffee’s ready,” he said without looking away from the food, “and eggs’ll be done soon. Could you grab some plates? I didn’t put my braces on.”

Renee kissed his temple, then squeezed around him for plates.

“Oh, and I hope scrambled is OK? I can’t eat undercooked eggs. But I can make others for you, if you want?”

“If you cook, I eat,” Renee said, handing him the plates and then moving to pour herself some coffee. “You’ll see I’m not a picky eater.”

A few minutes later, they were seated at the table, and Renee noticed with warm surprise that Kai ate his entire portion of eggs easily, instead of his usual forced manner. “So, tell me about that song—the broken road one.”

Kai flushed, red from collar to crown.

“What happened to ‘as you wish’?” she teased.

“OK,” he said reluctantly, shyly. “Just. Don’t laugh.” Kai dipped his head, and he sang, his voice scratchy and low, not much tune to it, “I think of the years I’ve spent just passing through/I’d like to have them back again, and give them all to you./But you just smile and take my hand/you’ve been there and you understand/it’s all part of a

grander plan that is coming true.” Kai lifted his eyes just enough to meet hers, though he was still flushed, and his hands trembled suddenly as he continued, “But every long lost dream has led me to where you are/others who broke my heart, they were like northern stars/pointing me on my way into your loving arms/This much I know is true/God bless the broken road/that led me straight to you.”

“Kai . . .” It was the only word she could manage.

He lowered his head again, pushed some hair out of his face. “It’s stupid; I should never have brought it up. And I can’t sing.”

Renee rose quickly, crossed to him, and pressed her lips to his in a passionate kiss. She caught him off guard, and he tried to pull away initially, but finally, he dove into it, holding her face, pouring himself into the kiss in a way that made her ache for him. She climbed into his lap, and soon he was smoothing his hands over every part of her, the two of them suddenly desperate for each other.

“Do I need to sing more often?” he said with a lascivious glint in his eyes.

Renee hummed happily, rubbing Kai’s crotch with her palm. “We have time to go back to bed.”

“Hmm,” Kai said, kissing Renee’s neck. “I’m not sure if we do. I’ve got a better idea.” Kai pushed everything on the table to the side, then lifted Renee onto its surface.

“What—what are you doing?” Renee said with a giggle.

He grinned, started to undo the button and zipper on her pants.

“Kai?”

“Do you trust me?”

After last night, after this morning, when he could have taken her and he didn’t? “Yes.”

Kai lifted her with one arm, used the other to pull her panties and jeans down. His breathing had increased, and he licked his lips. “Stop still applies, just say it whenever you need to.” Then he pushed her back, gently but firmly, and guided her closer, her ankles on his shoulders. She could feel his breath, deliciously warm on her bare thighs. “But I don’t think you’ll want me to.”

Without warning, she suddenly felt his mouth, hot and wet in a place she never, ever imagined a mouth would be. And then what had to be his tongue began to move, and Kai was so right. She never wanted him to stop.

She got lost in the sensation, not even entirely sure what he was doing, but loving every minute of it. When she finally climaxed with another loud scream—she’d never screamed during sex before—she lay there, trembling and boneless, her eyelids fighting to close.

Kai chuckled, kissed each thigh before helping her ease her panties and jeans back up. “I’ve been dreaming of tasting you for weeks,” Kai said, licking his lips.

She felt a little dizzy as she sat on the table, looking down at him, one hand helping to prop her up while the other massaged his crotch. His eyes were hungry, but it didn’t frighten her, because there was a softness to him, too. No man—especially Jude—had treated her the way Kai did—with *love*, with reverence. She sighed softly, still blissful from orgasm. “What can I do for you?” She laughed and clapped her hand over her mouth. “Oh God, I’ll never be able to say that at Lost Apple without thinking dirty thoughts.”

She heard more than saw Kai unbutton and unzip his jeans and pull himself out, long and hard just as she’d remembered from the night before, the tip seeping. “It won’t take much,” he said, “if you touch me.”

She hopped off the table, stood beside him, reached out and fingered the tip, spreading the stickiness over it, sliding his foreskin out of the way. He moaned, and she could see how badly he wanted to stroke himself, his hands gripping his thighs, but he was holding back, hoping she would finish him instead. He watched her as she teased him, a finger gliding over his slit, the subtlest whine a plea for more.

“Can you thrust?” she asked, her heart beginning to race.

He looked at her, confused.

“If I . . .” She licked her lips, glanced downward. “You won’t force me?”

Kai finally seemed to get her meaning. “I would love to feel your mouth on me. If you’re comfortable with that. I won’t hurt you.” He was breathing heavily, holding himself with one hand, squeezing occasionally with just his thumb, more precome beeding at the tip. The hunger was still there, but so was his sincerity. She was shocked by how much she wanted to do this, to kiss him *there* just as he had kissed her, and it felt especially naughty since he was sitting in his chair, fully dressed. If she did this, she’d probably never be able to look at him in his wheelchair without blushing.

“Re. If you don’t want to do this, you don’t have to. I’ll be OK. Really.”

Without another word, she snagged a chair, pulled it close, and sat, perched on the edge. She planted her hands on his thighs and leaned in. He smelled musky, salty, so deliciously *male*, but it’d been a long time since she’d done this, longer since she’d wanted to, so she stuck her tongue out tentatively, licking his slit.

He groaned and she felt him shudder, then gasp when she took just his head in, her tongue exploring the shape of it, teasing around his foreskin, feeling how soft the skin was, how it gave gently when she sucked. So different than the shaft, hard and firm in her hand as she held it in place. In the back of her mind, a voice screamed that any moment he’d grab her hair, tangling and pulling and pushing her onto him until he filled her throat, stealing her breath and making her gag and panic, but he didn’t touch her.

He tried to form words as she gained confidence and took more of him into her mouth, feeling him grow against her tongue, the crown bumping against her palate, but all that escaped his lips were grunts and groans and hisses, each signaling when she did something he liked in particular. When she swirled her tongue around the head, once, twice, sucking with a medium amount of pressure, she finally felt his hand on her shoulder. Pressing her away urgently.

“Re . . . I’m gonna . . .”

She popped off just in time, feeling his warmth explode over her chin, barely able to catch it with her hands.

“Re, shit—” Kai could barely speak, wrapping his hand over the head of his dick as his body continued to jerk, the final edge of his orgasm.

She was laughing, wiping her face, hoping she wouldn’t have a Monica Lewinsky moment and need to change her shirt.

Kai’s stomach jerked once more, and then he went still. His legs didn’t spasm this time, like they had the night before. His head lolled back, his dick softening, leaving a trail of white from tip to the puddle in his hand. “Thank you,” he managed.

Renee smiled, grabbing some napkins for each of them. “I liked that,” Renee said, surprised.

Kai chuckled as he cleaned his hand, tucked himself back in. “I’ll never say no to that,” he said with a grin. Then he seemed to spot the time on the microwave across the room. Sighing heavily, he added. “Go wash up. We need to head out in a few minutes.”

She leaned forward and met him in a short kiss, which he deepened, a hand cradling her face. He licked her lips, as if savoring her taste before leaning back, and she tried to memorize the look in his eyes in that moment so that she wouldn't forget it over the next week.

Renee had her feet folded up on the seat, bobbing and dancing to the Christmas mix tape she'd begged Kai to let her play as he drove her to the airport. When "Christmas Don't Be Late" came on, she squealed and turned it up, singing along.

Kai raised a single eyebrow. "What the hell is that?"

"Christmas music."

He cleared his throat, a wordless indication that her answer wasn't what he was looking for.

"It's The Chipmunks!"

He glanced at her, sideways, for a long moment.

She sighed, turned the volume down. "The Chipmunks," she said again, with emphasis, as if that was all the explanation needed, but when Kai only sighed, she was forced to elaborate. "It was this show about these anthropomorphic chipmunks who sang. Alvin, Theodore, and . . . Simon. And Alvin was always getting into trouble, so their adoptive father, who was a human man, was always yelling, 'ALVIN!'"

Kai nodded slowly, his face showing how odd he found the whole concept.

"I guess when you try to explain it, it does sound a little insane."

"Well, I already know you're insane; you like me."

Renee's eyebrows dipped. "Kai—"

Kai shrugged, looked over just for an instant, flashing a smile. His body language said that was a joke, but Renee knew it wasn't. Not really.

"I guess you didn't watch many cartoons growing up?"

Kai shook his head. "Not really. David only liked the ones that had a lot of slapstick, you know, stuff you didn't need to hear to understand? And my English wasn't good enough to interpret something like that when I was that young. Not that we had control over the TV anyway."

For several minutes, Renee watched the patchy, snow-covered farms pass by the window. "Are you going to County House for Thanksgiving?"

She could almost feel the tension in the car ratchet up, and when she turned her head, she saw Kai gripped the wheel more stiffly.

"Sorry. Never mind. Stupid question." She started to reach for the volume knob, to turn the music back up, but he reached over for only a second to stop her before letting his right hand return to the hand controls.

Kai let out a long sigh, nibbled his lip; she realized it was a habit he did when he was thinking, but not just about anything. No, he only bit his lip like that when he was working through some of his inner demons. Right now, she knew he was debating about whether he was going to be honest with her, or tell a shade of the truth, enough to satisfy her for now, or deflect her and artfully change the subject. It amazed her how well she could read him already.

Finally, he replied, "Thanksgiving has always been a difficult holiday for me." She watched his fingers shift on the steering wheel, another habit of his. His hands and fingers were often restless, as if they were so used to being used for conversation that when they weren't, they still felt the need to move. But there was a difference between his natural fidgeting and the anxious way he'd pick at his shirt or drum on his pushrims

or squeeze the steering wheel. “In some ways, worse than Christmas,” Kai added with a long sigh.

Renee wanted to reach over and squeeze his hand, but she couldn't, not while he was driving, so she watched him instead, waiting for him to elaborate, more of the same bland scenery flying past, white with patches of yellowish grass pushing through. An old barn, falling in on itself. A lone, lonely looking cow, its red and white coat thick to keep out winter's chill.

Kai inhaled sharply through his nose, bit his lip again. Squeezed the steering wheel. “The last Thanksgiving before my parents died . . . I got very sick. I was in the hospital a long time. The past four years, once I reunited with Jon. . . I spent every single one either in the hospital, or recovering from being in the hospital.” He winced, but it was more an expression of sadness than pain. He bit his lower lip hard. Renee could hardly believe he was being so forthcoming. “And the years in between, at County House? Thanksgiving always reminded me of everything I didn't have. Didn't think I'd ever have.”

Renee opened her mouth, but what would she say? What could she possibly say to that?

Kai's eyes were fixed firmly on the road ahead of them. “I could go back to County House any other day of the year, but not on Thanksgiving. Never on Thanksgiving.”

The Calhoun County Municipal Airport was laughably small: a building just large enough to contain two check-in counters, a single security lane, and a tiny waiting area. The baggage claim was no more than a modified garage door, the attendants on one side, handing your bag through it as you waited on the other. The gate led straight onto the tarmac, where you walked a few feet up to the small Embraer jet that would take you to Chicago and then onto your final destination.

Only one airline flew into the airport, only a couple times a day, and only between Jonesville and Chicago. If you wanted to go anywhere else, you could charter a private plane, or drive two-and-a-half hours to Omaha, the nearest major airport.

But with the university, and the hospital, and the small amount of oil in the county, the tiny airport kept busy enough.

Kai pulled into one of the handicapped spots, put the car in park, and undid his seatbelt. After his stupid revelation about Thanksgiving, things had been quiet, but strained for the rest of the drive. He felt like he should say something, maybe make a joke, tell her he hadn't been serious, but Renee knew him well enough at this point that no matter how convincing he might be to anyone else, she'd see right through him.

Renee spoke before he could think of what to say. “I didn't know,” she said in a low voice, reaching up to cradle his cheek. “I could cancel my flight. Stay here. I don't mind.”

Kai couldn't hide his surprise. “Re. You can't do that.”

“Why not?”

He smiled, took her hands in his. “You do have a family to go home to,” Kai explained, his stomach doing a strange knotting thing that felt like part of the start of an anxiety attack, but he knew it wasn't. Well, at least he didn't think it was. He couldn't believe Renee was willing to change her plans—not see her grandmother, whom Kai knew Renee missed terribly—just for him. The only person who had *ever* changed their life around for Kai was Jon.

Renee nodded, but she'd withdrawn into herself, a habit Kai recognized eerily well. "Jude'll be there, too."

Kai sighed, squeezed her hand tight, but not too tight, remembering how small and delicate her hands were. "Go home. See your family. But if he hurts you in *any* way . . ." Kai's eyes flashed anger he struggled to control. "Call me. Call me, and I will get my crippled ass on a plane, fly down there and kick his ass."

Renee laughed, and it warmed Kai's heart, turning his stomach's knot into butterflies.

"Remember I told you I broke a guy's nose with my crutches once? That was with shitty, cheap ones. Now I have good, stronger, solid sticks that could probably do a lot more damage before they break." Kai smiled faintly, teased a curl by her cheek. "You'll be OK. I'll . . ." He cursed himself inwardly for the hesitation. ". . . be OK." He pulled her close, kissed her, cherishing the taste of her lipgloss, covering the subtle natural sweetness of her lips, her tongue that still tasted faintly of coffee. He leaned his forehead against hers, sighed softly. "Do you need help with your bag?"

She shook against him, clearly not wanting to go just as much as he wanted to keep her there. "No. No point in you going through all the trouble, especially since that airport is so claustrophobic. I only have a carry-on." She pulled back, reached into her bag and took out the sheet of photos from the night before, bent them in half, and carefully tore at the seam. "Here. Two for you and two for me," she said with a smile, offering him one half.

Kai stared at the pictures. In the first, they were kissing, Renee perched on his lap, and he could see the sweet smile on each of their faces that brought one to his own, now. In the second, they were laughing, Kai gripping Renee's waist as she leaned away as if he were tickling her, her head just barely in frame, her curls blurring on the edges. Kai was looking at her instead of the camera, eyes bright, shoulders relaxed. It was strange to see himself like this. Other than school photos (which of course, there was no one to ever order any), Kai hadn't seen many photographs of himself. He looked . . . so happy.

"Thanks, Re," Kai said, tucking the photos into his dash. "*You should go.*"

She sighed, leaned forward for another quick kiss that hit the side of his mouth. "I'll call you." She pushed the car door open and the cold shocked them both. "And I'll bring you beignet mix!"

Kai laughed, waving as she skipped toward the terminal, twisting in his seat to watch until she disappeared inside. A crushing weight hit him next—for the past few weeks, they'd seen each other almost every single day. He would never admit it to anyone, but going an entire week without her seemed ridiculously daunting.

He sighed, resecuring his seatbelt and staring at the photos. How had Renee wormed her way into his heart so quickly? And, as wonderful as things were between them right now, what was going to happen once she realized the guy who offered to beat the shit out of her ex—and he would—was frequently paralyzed by anxiety attacks?

With the holiday coming up and all the long night shifts he'd been working over the past month, Jon had decided to take the day off. No clinic visits, nothing. It felt strange at first, but when Kai suggested Jon join him at the pool—it was Kai's first time since before his injury—Jon accepted. He wasn't much of a swimmer, but it'd be good to spend some time with Kai. Jon felt like he'd hardly seen his brother lately, between his work schedule and Kai spending an increasing amount of time with Renee.

The Y was closed today, so Kai had taken them to the JU athletic complex, which was “so much better, anyway,” Kai explained. Kai had his duffle in his lap, the strap over his head, making Jon feel a little awkward as he followed Kai into the foyer. It was early, and the Saturday of a week-long holiday break, so it was pretty empty. Ahead, Jon could see a bored-looking girl reading a book lazily in a single booth, the others all silent and empty. Kai stopped Jon and spun around, looking up.

“OK, so, technically this is for students only, so, here’s what we’re going to do.” Kai pulled the strap off and offered it to his brother. “Take this. Then push me toward the desk.”

Jon accepted the bag, which was a lot heavier than it looked, gaping at Kai. “Push you?”

“Yes. Just a few feet. Play along, all right?”

“Kai . . .”

“Disability makes most people uncomfortable. The more disabled you seem, the more uncomfortable normals are. David and I used to do stuff like this all the time. Mostly just to fuck with people.” Kai grinned.

“Kai!”

Kai laughed, dipped his head back so he could see Jon’s face better as he spun around. “I bet you’ve never even returned a library book late, have you?” He shook his head. “Push.”

Jon obeyed. It felt wrong to touch the back of Kai’s chair when Kai was perfectly healthy, even on his brother’s command. Because of the low back, Jon had to bend forward, giving him a chance to whisper in his ear. “Is this why I never do anything with you?”

Kai just shrugged, saying nothing as they drew closer.

The girl didn’t look up from her book as they approached. “ID,” she said mechanically.

“My bag,” Kai said in a thick accent that Jon hadn’t heard Kai use in years, not since they’d first reconnected, when Kai still had to concentrate on articulating his words, especially the final consonants.

This made the girl drop her book, gape at Kai. Jon wished he could see his brother’s face, but the girl then looked at him, at the strap of the bag across his chest, obviously expectant. Jon stepped away from Kai so he wouldn’t whack him with the bag as he shifted it, finding Kai’s student ID in the side pocket and handing it over. The woman looked at it, then up at Jon, waiting.

“And yours?”

Jon turned to Kai, since obviously his brother had a plan. “Uh, I don’t have one?”

“This facility is for students only. I can’t let you in without an ID,” she said in monotone, obviously reciting something she’d memorized out of a manual of guidelines somewhere. But she never stopped *staring* at Kai.

“He help me,” Kai said in that same accent. “He you need allow in.” In addition to the inarticulate pronunciation, Kai was letting his words blur together, so that last sentence sounded more like, “Heeyunee louin.” It didn’t help that Kai was throwing in his odd ASL grammar now, too, which had frustrated Jon to no end when they’d first reconnected, especially since Kai had been perfectly capable of proper English.

The girl blinked at Kai, then glanced up at Jon, clearly not understanding what the hell Kai was saying. For a moment, the girl seemed to be inwardly debating about

whether she should press harder for clarification or just end her obvious discomfort and violate protocol by letting them both in.

“All right,” she said, swiping Kai’s card and then entering something in the computer to bypass the system, “but if you’re going to accompany him regularly, you need to get your own card. Come back after the holiday and talk to the manager,” she said, directing everything to Jon instead of Kai, handing Kai’s card back to Jon. “I’ll buzz the side open so you can push him through.”

“Thank you,” Kai said, waiting for Jon to push him again.

Jon resisted shaking his head, and did so, pushing Kai until they were through and out of the sight of the desk girl.

“Stop, stop,” Kai said in his regular voice.

Jon immediately let go, standing to his full height, walking around so he could see Kai better. “You are impossible.”

Kai shrugged, held up his hand for his bag. “It worked, didn’t it?”

Jon offloaded the bag with some relief. Kai was right; he really needed to get in better shape. It’d be good for his circulation, and considering he’d already lived as a diabetic for over twenty years, that might not be a bad idea. “I just can’t believe the way she stared at you.”

Kai grinned. “That accent never fails. I was mocked relentlessly for years because of it. I might as well use it to my advantage when I can. Why do you think I pulled it on you when you first showed up four years ago?”

Jon followed as Kai pushed toward the locker rooms. “You were *faking* that?”

Kai laughed. “Faking is such a harsh word. No, back then it still took a lot of conscious effort to speak articulately. All I had to do was be lazy, and the accent came naturally. At the time, I wasn’t sure yet if you were worth the effort.” Kai disappeared into the locker room before Jon could question him about that. Jon remembered the initial bitterness and hostility he’d faced, confronting Kai for the first time after more than a decade apart, but he never really imagined Kai had seen things that way. More proof that Jon really didn’t know what those lost years of Kai’s life had been like.

By the time Jon found his brother, Kai had already transferred out of his chair onto a bench and was pulling off his clothes, revealing the strange suit he’d evidently put on at home. Jon had never seen Kai actually in it, the suit covering his chest and back, going down to just above his knees, revealing his powerful arms. Kai looked like an athlete, and Jon wondered, if things had been different, if maybe he could have been. Jon hesitated, pulling off his own shirt, knowing how gaunt he was. Vicky was right; he needed to take better care of himself, especially if a little Jon or Vicky would be here soon. Kai used to be even thinner than Jon. If Kai could bulk up, maybe Jon could, too.

“Here,” Kai said, tossing something Jon’s way. “It’s my old one. It might be a little big, but the advantage of this style suit is it won’t fall off.”

Jon held it up: a suit just like Kai’s, only the fabric was a little faded from use.

“It’s clean, Jon.”

“I’ll look ridiculous.”

Kai laughed as he tossed his clothes in his bag. “Yes, you will. If you decide you want to do this with me regularly, I’ll order you something different, in your size. But for now, little brother gets to give big brother hand-me-downs!” Kai stuffed his bag in his locker, then began stretching his legs on the bench.

As Jon struggled with the skin-clinging spandex—or whatever futuristic

material this suit was made out of—he realized why Kai put it on at home. He managed to finally get it up, shifting his weight, pulling at the fabric between his legs—he did *not* like the way it felt there—struggling to reach behind him to zip it up.

He heard Kai laugh, shift his legs. “Sit down.” Jon obeyed, and a moment later, heard and felt the zip as Kai obliged him. “There. You should stretch, but you can do it out there. Come on.” Kai grabbed a couple things out of his locker before shutting and locking it, transferring back to his chair and leading the way out to the pool.

The heavy scent of chlorine hit Kai’s nostrils immediately as they approached the pool. That smell, the subtle squelch his tires made on the wet tiles, the echo of splashes in the large room, the heaviness of the humidity: it all blended together into pure happiness. Kai had worried Micovic would never clear him to swim again, and he’d honestly wondered if part of what made the last couple months so hard was his inability to dive into the pool and swim until there was nothing but his body and the dim rush of water in his ears as he pushed himself lap after lap.

Kai stopped at the edge of a pair of empty lanes, pulling on his cap and adjusting his goggles. He noticed Jon hesitate, gripping their towels to his body and looking around nervously. “You do know how to swim, right?”

“The basics,” Jon said, though he still seemed tense.

Kai angled his head to look up at his brother. “Look, you don’t need to do this if you don’t want to. I just thought it might be fun.”

Jon actually laughed. “This coming from the guy who would probably see skydiving as fun.”

Kai pulled closer to the lane, locked his wheels, and lowered himself to the floor. “There are a lot worse ways to die,” he said with a shrug, tying his pull buoy to his legs.

Jon joined Kai on the floor, sitting cross legged, laying the towels on the seat of Kai’s chair. “What’s that?”

“It helps me keep my legs afloat in the water. Makes it easier for me to use my upper body without having to worry about them.”

Jon suddenly looked incredibly sad, and Kai, for a moment, got a taste of his own medicine, uncertain what had caused the sudden shift in his brother’s face.

“What?”

Jon shook his head, smiled faintly. “It’s just . . . I’m realizing how little I really know you. Just in the last half hour, I feel like I’ve learned more about you than . . .”

Kai sighed. “Jon, let’s just swim. OK? I’ll race you to the end? How about, every lap you win, you get to ask me something. Fair?”

Jon eyed Kai through narrowed vision, as if seeing through him. Kai might have been restricted from using the pool for the last eight weeks, but that didn’t mean he was out of shape. He was pretty confident he could beat Jon every time without even trying. And Jon apparently knew that.

Kai put on his goggles, pulled his legs into the water, then lowered himself into the pool. “Best thing about swimming? No talking!” Kai said with a grin, taking off down the lane, feeling like he was flying.

Jon had exhausted himself after only a hundred yards or so—he really needed to get in better shape—so he’d spent part of his time hanging out in the shallows, sitting on the edge, watching Kai. Jon knew there was no way Kai could have had formal lessons, and

he primarily used his upper body, but he moved so smoothly and powerfully through the water. Jon could see as Kai made lap after lap, only pausing to turn (since he couldn't flip turn) why swimming meant so much to him.

In the water, he was just like anyone else. Walking and talking weren't important. Jon wondered, did speaking clearly still require effort? Jon knew Kai sometimes slipped into ASL grammar when he was tired or sick or mad. That day they'd reconnected, when Kai had first revealed he could speak, his sentences had been awkward, his pronunciation rough, and he'd needed to think and talk slowly whenever he put forth the effort to use properly pronounced and grammatically sound English. And he'd been furious with Jon for forgetting how to sign, for forcing him to speak. It had never occurred to Jon that at least part of the reason Kai hated English so much was because he'd been ridiculed for his speech problems.

A wave of guilt crashed into Jon. How selfish had he been, not hiring an ASL tutor until now? How many times had Kai perhaps wanted to talk to him, but was dissuaded by the language barrier? Jon recalled, a few months earlier, how Kai had broached the subject of Renee, explaining it was easier for him to discuss the topic in sign. Jon hadn't really appreciated what that meant.

Jon's thoughts were interrupted when Kai's head popped up above the water, his pull buoy in one hand, his other gripping the wall. He was beaming. "I fucking love these lungs," he said, breathing hard, tossing the buoy on the wall and pulling off his goggles and cap.

Jon smiled, but he knew it was tainted by his thoughts.

Kai's face flickered for a microsecond before slipping back into his smile. "Did you even swim at all? I only did half my set today."

Jon shrugged.

Kai pushed his stuff aside, turned around so his back was to the wall, then levered his body out of the water and onto the floor as effortlessly as he breathed with his new lungs. Jon wasn't about to admit that without his legs to help push himself out, he would have struggled.

Kai was already wiping off excess water and beginning to stretch his upper body, his legs dangling in the water, one bobbing with minor spasms. Jon's instinct was to ask if Kai was OK, but nothing about Kai suggested he was in pain, so Jon held his tongue.

"I can see why you love the pool," Jon tried instead. "You swim like a fish."

Kai laughed, glanced over his shoulder, then planted his palms behind him to pull his legs out of the water. "Yeah, a gimp fish." But he rolled his eyes at Jon's frown.

"When did you learn to swim? I never asked. I guess I didn't really think—"

Kai shook his head, still smiling, as he began to stretch. The spasms in his leg had quieted, at least so they were no longer visible. "What, did you think I doggy paddled for 40 laps each week? Troy taught me some basics. When I was a kid, during some of my worst MLS flare ups, he'd work with me in the pool. It helped a lot. Allowed me to develop control where I had it, strengthen those muscles, stretch."

Kai bent forward, stretching his back, reaching for his toes, holding it for several seconds before releasing and pushing his torso back up. "In high school, the district wouldn't let me participate in PE, but I was required to take it. I tried to petition them to let me take swimming, but they said I was too much of a liability."

Jon wasn't sure what to say, so he merely watched Kai stretch.

"I don't know what the big deal was. If I drowned, it's not like there was anyone

to sue them.”

Kai spoke matter-of-factly, continuing to stretch his body; clearly, his nonchalance wasn't a facade. Kai's bluntness from his Deaf upbringing had faded over the years, but it still came through occasionally. And knowing that didn't make it hurt any less, hearing about his brother being alone, having something Kai clearly loved taken from him.

“What's wrong?”

Jon sighed, shook his head. “I just have a lot on my mind.”

Kai didn't seem to buy it, but he let it go for now, pulling his chair closer and spreading one of the towels over it. He gripped the seat and a wheel to lever himself into it. He used his hands to place his feet on the footrest, then to help settle his body fully back in the seat. He leaned forward, arms on his knees, bent in half, meeting Jon's eyes, since Jon hadn't yet stood.

“I think it'd be good for you to swim with me, but this is a guilt-free zone. The point of swimming is to shut off your mind.” Kai leaned back, gripped his left wheel for stability while offering his right hand to help pull Jon to his feet.

Jon smiled faintly. Then the words spilled out before he even realized he'd spoken. “Vicky's pregnant.”

Kai blinked, but he controlled his emotions, as usual, carefully crafting his response. “Wow, Jon. . . . Congratulations.”

“She just found out. She's not due till June. We're not telling anyone yet. . . .”

“I'm good at keeping secrets, Jon.”

Jon nodded, let out a breath. “You really wouldn't mind if I came with you each Saturday?”

Kai smiled. “I can even change my routine to work around your clinic hours if you want. I'll see about getting you a pass for here, so we don't need to worry about the YMCA swim lessons.”

Jon followed Kai back toward the locker room. “You—you'd do that?”

Kai laughed as he held the door open for Jon. “You've rearranged your entire life for me, more than once. I think I can change one small thing. It's . . . fun, spending time with you. Being brothers.”

Jon's brows furrowed. “You know, when the baby's born . . . things'll have to change. Between us.”

Jon caught a fleeting darkness, maybe even panic, in Kai's eyes before Kai shook his head and plastered on a bright smile. “Of course it will. It'll be really hard for the baby, knowing his uncle is so much better looking than his father. But he'll get over it.” Kai winked and powered into the locker room, disappearing between the rows.

Kai followed Jon into the Jonesville Diner, which was decently busy, the familiar scents of grease and coffee filling the air. Kai hadn't visited the diner since Nikki had left him, which meant it had been nearly two months. Despite his occasional pie craving, Kai hadn't been able to bring himself to drop in, since it held memories of both Becca and Nikki, which hung in the air as thick as the aroma of food.

But Jon had apparently been feeling sentimental—after all, their first meal together on Kai's 18th birthday had been here, when the two of them were only hours into reconciling their new situation. Kai, still desperate to discover Jon's true motivation behind his seeming benevolence, and Jon, frustrated and confused at how much Kai had changed in the twelve years they'd been apart.

Kai said nothing as a waitress he didn't recognize guided them to a table, taking a chair away for him so he could slide in across from his brother. The two of them studied the menu in silence. Kai rarely ate anything other than pie here, but he knew Jon would insist on a more nutritious choice, so he scanned for something vegetarian that he knew his stomach could handle.

A surreptitious glance told Kai Jon wasn't actually looking at the menu, but lost in his thoughts. Perhaps he was regretting telling Kai about Vicky's pregnancy. Perhaps he was regretting the pregnancy. Kai decided he wouldn't point out the irony that Jon had lectured Kai more than once about "safe sex." Kai reminded himself to make sure he had some condoms in his bag for when Renee got back. Maybe it would be a while before she was ready for vaginal sex, but Kai figured it probably was best not to take any chances either way.

Kai was debating saying something when Marge swung by the table, looking happy and relieved to see Kai. "Oh, hon, I was beginning to worry about you. How long has it been?"

Kai shrugged, noticed Jon was working even harder to fake profound interest in his menu.

"I'm sorry about Nikki," she said sincerely. "The usual? Pie of the day is pumpkin."

"Marge, this is my brother, Jon. Jon, Marge. This is her diner, essentially."

Marge waved a large hand dismissively, but Kai could see how the compliment had pleased her. "What can I get you boys?"

"Coffee and chef salad," Jon said brusquely. Kai waited a second too long to place his own order, prompting Jon to ask, "*Do I need to order for you?*"

Deja vu, Kai thought, though of course Jon wouldn't order him a bacon cheeseburger, now that he was a vegetarian. Kai gave Marge his most winning smile. "Hot milk," Kai said. "And I'm told I need to eat my lunch like a good boy before I can have pie," Kai added sardonically. "Grilled cheese, no fries."

"No problem, hon," Marge said with a laugh. "I'll be right back with your drinks."

Kai waited for Marge to leave before leaning back in his wheelchair and studying Jon in a way that made his brother shift uncomfortably in his seat.

"What?"

"So what are your plans with Vicky?"

Jon stared at Kai blankly.

"Since she's . . ." Kai waved a hand in the air before finally signing "*pregnant*," but in a way that meant it was unexpected.

Jon frowned deeply, but quickly turned it into a smile when Marge returned with a mug of milk for Kai and a carafe to pour coffee for Jon.

"Food'll be out in a bit. You holler if you need anything."

Jon reached for his coffee like a junkie grabbing his last fix and took a few tentative sips. "I don't know. We haven't even said the 'L' word."

Kai frowned for a fraction of a second before pressing his lips together to control his expression. "*You don't want the baby?*"

Jon shook his head. Sighed. "*I do want the baby. But . . . I told Vicky I didn't want to get married.*"

"*And she's fine with that?*" Kai couldn't hide the scepticism in his face.

"Supposedly," Jon muttered. He looked miserable, but before Kai could say or

sign anything else, Jon continued, “*She said she’ll put the baby up for adoption if I’m not in this with her, and I won’t let that happen.*”

Ah, so that explained a lot. Jon clearly wasn’t ready to be a father—a real father, not the surrogate he’d been to Kai for so many years—but he wouldn’t risk his child going through the system, either. Kai didn’t blame him. He could barely take care of himself, but Kai would be willing to take the kid in personally if it would mean a “real” family instead of foster and group homes.

“*You’ll need to move in together,*” Kai signed single-handed, adding sugar to his milk, playing his favorite role of disaffected perfectly.

Jon sighed, shrugged. “Probably.”

Kai bit his lip, tried to smile and mask the unease in his eyes as everything sank in. “*I’ve never lived alone.*” It was ridiculous, but he felt his anxiety flaring up, his fingers twitching. He debated reaching into his bag for his pillbox and taking a hydroxyzine, but there’d be no way to hide that from Jon. Would it be better to admit the thought of living alone, or Jon leaving him, as stupid and outrageous as it was, terrified him? Or risk having a panic attack in the middle of the Saturday lunch crowd? The thought of that fate made his heart rate spike and his breathing become uneven, sweat breaking out on his hairline.

“Take your meds,” Jon said in a calm voice. “It’s all right.”

Kai’s hands were going numb, so he simply nodded, shifted his body in his chair and snatched out his pill case. He set it on the table for a moment, taking a few slow breaths and trying to calculate square roots in his head to give his shaking a chance to ease enough he wouldn’t send tablets flying all over the place.

The pills rattled in the box, and he finally felt his brother’s hands on his, plucking a hydroxyzine out and pressing it into Kai’s fingers, which were trembling so badly it took Kai several tries to get the tablet to his mouth.

Kai swallowed the pill quickly, closing his eyes and trying not to think how much he hated himself in this moment, because it would only make things worse. He could feel himself being pulled closer toward panic attack than calm, a full-body tremor racking his frame, and the threat of having one in public only made the rush toward full crazy accelerate. He could beeline for the bathroom, but right now the thought of an enclosed space made the terror surge.

People were staring now, probably, though he had his eyes tightly shut. Staring more than normal, whispering to each other about the crazy guy in the wheelchair.

Kai couldn’t breathe. He couldn’t breathe. He tried to take deep breaths, but his hands were numb and his head was buzzing and he couldn’t seem to get enough air. His shoulders rose and fell with each desperate, shallow breath, and part of him prayed he’d pass out because at least that would be an escape.

“Kai. Kai. You’re OK.” Jon’s voice, and his hand on Kai’s shoulder.

The pull of unconsciousness was alluring, his breathing slowing to the point at which Kai had to consciously remember to breathe in and out.

“Stay with me, Kai. Come on. Deep breaths.” Jon had a hand on Kai’s chest, was coaxing him to breathe in and out with gentle pushes on his sternum, the way he’d learned to breathe on his own again after his transplant. Slowly, Kai felt the tension seep away, and breathing became less effort, though his chest was still tight and foggy remained. His body felt heavy, used up. Right now, even though he knew everything in the restaurant had come to a sudden stop to watch the freak show, he didn’t care. He just wanted to go home and sleep.

“The ambulance is on its way.” Another voice. Marge. Kai was bent over now, his forehead resting on his knees. He could hear the murmur of curious voices around him, but it took too much effort to try to parse any of them out.

He did hear Jon say something, maybe in assent to Marge, and smooth Kai’s back. Kai wanted to tell him he was fine, that he just needed to go home, but he felt so incredibly drained, he wasn’t even sure if he could speak.

Jon crouched down beside him, whispering in his ear. “Let the EMTs evaluate you, and if your vitals are OK, I won’t let them take you.”

Kai turned his head enough Jon could see the relieved look in his eyes.

Then Jon may have asked Marge to pack their lunches—including a few slices of pie—to go—as if they’d simply decided to leave early and it was no big deal. In that moment, as ashamed and exhausted as he was, Kai couldn’t have loved his brother more.

Renee’s journey had been long and tiring. The flight from Jonesville to Chicago had been uneventful, but bad weather had delayed her departure from O’Hare, so that when she finally touched down in New Orleans, she couldn’t be more grateful. Still, part of her wished Kai were beside her, flashing that lopsided grin, looking incredibly out of place with his tall, blond, Midwestern looks, yet not caring as long as he was with her. Checking her phone, she saw she didn’t have any new texts from him, and she couldn’t help a flare of disappointment. She sent him a quick message to let him know she’d arrived in New Orleans safe and sound, and secretly hoped she’d get a reply right away. She sighed softly when she didn’t and reminded herself that Kai had said he had plans to keep pretty busy over the break, and knew they’d talk soon.

As the plane taxied to the gate, she wondered again, as she had about how he showered, what traveling would be like for him. She knew he’d never really left Jonesville, and that he’d never been on a plane before. Renee wondered how Kai would get on the plane, and where they’d put his chair or crutches? Would not having them handy make Kai nervous? He never said anything about it out right, but she’d seen his face pale the night before, when they’d gotten into the photo booth together and she’d started to leave his crutches outside, out of his reach. And she’d recognized the look of immense relief, too, when she’d managed to fit them inside the booth with them.

She had never really thought about it until that moment, because he seemed so laid back and comfortable with his disability most of the time, that he really did rely on his crutches or his chair for his independence. It was strange, but being with Kai made her simultaneously more aware of his disability and yet, it was easy to forget about his MLS, too, when his legs weren’t spasming.

Renee puzzled over this quandary as she gathered her bag and filed out of the plane, noticing an airline employee waiting impatiently with one of those large, bulky airport wheelchairs, probably to assist an old lady Renee had noticed on her way off the plane. The wheelchair, which she wouldn’t have thought twice about before Kai, looked so ugly and awkward, like comparing an old 70s station wagon to a brand-new, sleek sports car. If Kai traveled with her, would he have to leave his wheelchair at home and use one of those? She imagined Kai would be horrified if he couldn’t bring his chair with him, and she didn’t like the image she had of Kai having to maneuver around in a bulky, heavy chair.

Renee pushed the thoughts from her mind for now. She was home; as she drew away from the gates toward security and the ticketing area, she could already smell the

familiar humidity. One thing about New Orleans Renee loved was no matter how much you might have changed—and over the past few months, Renee certainly had—the Crescent City always stayed the same.

Renee had hardly emerged from the secure terminal area when a squeal of joy met her ears. She looked up to see her grandparents and younger brother waiting for her near one of the shops, her maw maw Evangeline rushing up to her like she was a twenty-year-old girlfriend instead of a woman in her 70s. Evangeline wrapped her arms around Renee, squeezing all the air out.

“Oh, hon, I missed you,” she said in her soft, lilting accent that also meant “home.”

“I missed you, too, Maw Maw,” Renee echoed, squeezing back. “I told y’all you didn’t need to park!”

“That’s what I said, too, but you know your maw maw.” Anthony, Renee’s grandfather, stepped forward and offered her his own hug. “Missed you, too.”

Renee finally extracted herself from her grandparents, tilting her head at Luc, who smiled his foxy grin. “And you?”

“Ugh, anything to get away from the parentals and JP for awhile.”

Renee sized up her little brother. He was fifteen now, starting to shed his boyish looks and become a man, though he took after their mother and Evangeline, looking more like Renee’s fraternal twin than their older brother, JP, who had played football in high school and college. Luc was short, not much taller than Renee and Evangeline, narrow, and rail thin, with large, captivating hazel-green eyes and dark curly hair (just like Renee’s) that fell chaotically into his face, covering one eye. Luc’s hair had always been a fighting point between him and their parents: Luc liked it longer, the curls free and wild; their parents—especially their father—preferred it clipped short enough to mask them almost entirely.

She teased him by playing with his bangs. “How have Mom and Dad not killed you for this?” She laughed. Luc had always been *beautiful*, confused for a girl when he was younger, despite his mother’s attempts to dress him as boyishly as she could. His face was more oval than Renee’s, and he had a large, French-Roman nose, unlike her smaller one, but a brilliant smile with full, pouting lips and long, thick eyelashes. The hair wasn’t the only surprise: he was wearing a fitted, paint-splattered T-shirt and tight, low-slung jeans with leather flip flops that screamed “art student” far louder than the polos and khakis their brother had always favored.

Luc shrugged, pushed some of his hair off his forehead only for it to slide right back. “I told them it’s my hair and I’ll wear it how I want, or I’d move in with Maw Maw and Paw Paw.” He flashed his smile again, which made Renee laugh. Then he pulled her into a tight hug. “Missed ya, sis.”

Their mother had suffered terribly from Empty Nest Syndrome even before Renee had left, since JP was her favorite, so she could see Marie giving Luc more leniency if it meant keeping her baby a little longer. Perhaps that explained why they’d finally allowed him to go to NOCCA.

Luc shouldered her bag, even though it wasn’t really heavy and he wasn’t much bigger than her, threw his arm around her and started following their grandfather toward the exit. Anthony wasn’t known for his patience, and even as Renee and Luc had reconnected, had been inching away as a not-so-subtle signal to hurry up.

“I didn’t think it’d be so hard being just me and them, you know? But it’s not like JP isn’t always around anyway, and without you to buffer us . . .”

Re turned and awkwardly placed a kiss on her brother's cheek, surprised to feel it was rough. When had Luc started shaving? She still remembered him as a little kid, his toothless grins, following her everywhere.

Renee pulled away from Luc long enough to take off her coat and enjoy the balmy late November weather: in the 60s, with a soft breeze. "I'm guessing JP isn't a big fan of your new look."

Luc grunted as they carefully crossed traffic toward the parking lot. "Yeah, every time he sees me he tells me I should stop dressing like a fucking faggot."

Renee frowned and squeezed her brother's free hand.

"He doesn't like it when I glare at him and snap back with, 'I bought this look because "stuck up asshole" was sold out.'"

Renee was struggling not to laugh. "Ohmygod. You really told him that?"

Luc shrugged.

"And you're not limping?"

Luc shrugged again, flashed his smile. "The car is close. You know Paw Paw. He'll drive around for half an hour till he gets the spot right in front."

"I heard that!" Anthony called out.

Evangeline came up and squeezed Renee again. "Oh, I'm so glad you could make it home. How about we stop for po-boys on the way?"

Renee could feel herself drooling. She hadn't had a shrimp po-boy in months. In fact, she hadn't had any seafood in months. What had she been thinking, going to school in the Midwest, so far from a coast? "That would be awesome, Maw Maw."

They'd stopped at a total dive of a place on Tchoupitoulas, huddled around a table with their fries and po-boys. The restaurant was dark and dingy, but the food was fantastic, and it was another reminder of home and how much she'd missed it.

"So tell me about this boy of yours," Evangeline said in a way that suggested she'd been dying to ask since Renee landed.

Renee felt herself smiling, and she pulled the photos out of her wallet, where she'd folded them carefully. In the first one, Renee was staring at the camera, smiling, but Kai was looking at her instead, totally smitten, flashing his lopsided grin. She looked so small in his lap, and even sitting, even in the cropped shot of the photo booth, it was clear how tall he was. The second picture, they were both looking at the camera, Kai's arms wrapped securely around her, their heads leaned against each other, smiling, Kai's blue eyes bright and shining and happy.

"Oh my stars," Evangeline said, holding the photo close so she could see it better in the dim light. "He's even handsomer than you described, sugar."

Renee felt herself blush, but she was smiling proudly. The photos made the rounds. Evangeline seemed reluctant to part with it. Anthony studied it like it was this year's taxes, as if he could determine what kind of man Kai was from two 2x1" photos. Luc got the photos last, and she noticed his eyes widen slightly, and he unconsciously licked his bottom lip before taking in a breath, as if remembering he wasn't alone.

"How *tall* is he? You look so tiny."

"I am tiny," Renee said, laughing, taking the photos back. "But he is tall, even for over there, where everyone is a giant," Renee said proudly. "I don't know how tall, but the top of my head hits him about here," she said, pointing a few inches above the center of her chest.

"Over six foot," Anthony said to no one in particular.

“Oh, definitely,” Renee said as she felt her grandmother snagging the photos from her for another look.

“His eyes are so blue. Is it a trick of the light?”

Renee sighed, nibbled on a fry. “No. They’re even prettier in person. This incredible aquamarine, like the color of the Caribbean sea.”

Evangeline smiled. “He treats you well?” Her eyebrows were raised, her gaze prying. Renee heard the unsaid words. *Unlike Jude?*

Renee tilted her head, remembering that morning, Kai’s large hands holding her in place while his tongue, warm and wet. . . . She flushed again. “Yeah, he does,” she said in a kind of dreamy voice.

“Renee and Kai sitting in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G . . .” Luc sing-songed.

Evangeline squeezed her hand, finally relinquishing the photos, ignoring Luc. “That’s all that matters, then,” she said with a wink. “I can tell he cares about you. Reminds me of the way your paw paw used to look at me.”

Anthony promptly stuffed his face with some of his po-boy, but he glanced over at Evangeline, and Renee saw a bit of that same look. Maybe she and Kai would be like them some day, though Renee did wonder if Kai would live into old age. She’d decided she wouldn’t think about that, but it did pop into her head every now and then. Kai had been adamant in getting her to understand that there were no guarantees for his life expectancy, but she had meant it when she’d told him that she didn’t care. She’d rather have a year with Kai than nothing.

Evangeline squeezed her hand again, smiling knowingly. “You miss him?”

Renee couldn’t deny it. “Yeah. He’s . . . incredible, Maw Maw. I can’t wait for you to meet him.” She didn’t mention how difficult that could potentially be, but she knew she didn’t want to leave New Orleans without telling at least her maw maw about Kai’s health and disability.

Megan was working in the kitchen when she heard stomping, and then, when she didn’t immediately respond to that, a harshly loud, inarticulate shout. She sighed, rolled her eyes, and wiped her hands off on her apron. She loved David, but patience was definitely not one of his defining characteristics.

She found him standing outside their bedroom door. She looked at him, her eyes and face clearly conveying her annoyance.

He grabbed her hand and pulled her into their room, toward their bathroom. He’d replaced the doorframe so he could hang a wider door, and now he pointed to it, then leaned to one side for emphasis. “*Does it look crooked to you?*”

Isn’t that what levels are for? she thought, but instead, she signed, “*Looks fine.*”

He frowned, staring at it a few moments, before bending down to dig out another level. He stood on tiptoes, placing it there, studying it for a while.

She tapped him on the shoulder, but he ignored her, focused on his work. She tapped him again, harder.

This time, he turned around, and this time, he was the one who was annoyed. “*I need to get this done.*”

Megan sighed. “*You’ve been using every scrap of free time you have on this bathroom. And I’m in the kitchen trying to find something vegetarian to serve Thursday.*”

David shrugged, turned around and walked into the bathroom, Deafie for

conversation is over.

Megan sighed loudly, almost a grunt of frustration, and followed him. Pulling on his shoulder.

David finally turned around, and though he looked mad, she saw what she'd suspected, that veil he put up when he was trying to look disaffected but was, in fact, afraid of where she was taking the conversation.

"I've been giving you space about this, but obviously, if I don't push you. . . . What's the deal with you and Kai? Because my imagination has been running wild."

David blinked at her. Actually blushed. *"God, it's nothing like that!"* He sighed, perched on the counter. *"Kai and I . . ."* David shrugged.

"You don't call someone 'brother' for no reason."

David closed his eyes a moment, took a deep breath, then brought his hands to his chest. *"Everything I told you is true. We did go to school together. We did lose touch. But what I didn't tell you is . . . Kai was my roommate. At CH. For ten years."*

Megan felt a wave of relief wash over her. She'd concocted all kinds of crazy ideas in her mind. And not that she'd ever doubted her fiancé's sexuality before, but honestly, she'd never seen David act the way he had about Kai, and with no other explanation. . . . She leaned in close for a quick kiss, before pulling back. David still looked worried, and Megan couldn't see why. She knew David didn't like to talk about the group home where he'd spent most of his childhood, but there seemed to be more here.

"Why not tell me from the start?"

David glanced over at his tool bag, sitting in one corner of the bathroom, obviously wanting to break eye contact so he could end the discussion, but instead, he said, *"Because neither of us talk about CH. And it's impossible to talk about our friendship without bringing CH up."*

Megan was willing to leave it at that, but he reached out for her to get her to stay.

He looked at her a long while, studying her face as if inwardly debating whether he should explain. *"No one at CH signed. **No one.**"* David's eyes bored into hers, trying to convey the significance of the statement. *"I was alone for a year before Kai came. Kai was the **only** one I could talk to outside of school for ten years. **Ten years.**"* David bit his lip. *"You can't possibly understand what that was like. That's why he's my brother."* David rose, grabbed his tools, and disappeared, clearly needing space.

It was his way. Megan hated that when he was upset he often chose to deal with things on his own instead of turning to her, but she'd accepted she wouldn't change him, so she let him go. Still, his final words haunted her. David never talked about his childhood, and she'd never given it much thought. The Deaf community was so close knit, she'd presumed David, as affable as he was, must have had a lot of friends.

She had never really stopped to think how different David's experience must have been. Instead of growing up in the dorms with the rest of the kids, he'd lived elsewhere, with no one who spoke his language. No one except Kai.

David was right: even growing up as the only hearing person in a Deaf family, she couldn't begin to imagine how isolating that must have felt.

David was Deaf with a capital "D," and though he often complained about the hearing world, he was proud of who he was. This was the first time she'd really seen any kind of legitimate chink in David's Deaf Pride armor.

Suddenly, David's behavior since Halloween made sense: his elation at seeing

Kai again, his willingness to pick up and go when Kai needed him, his determination to make their house work for him.

Megan wandered back into the kitchen, where she'd been midway through testing out a few vegetarian recipes for the holiday when she spied a note on the counter. *Need nails. Love you.* Megan knew David had enough nails to build a bridge, in every shape and size, but she accepted the note as his way of making a legitimate excuse for his escape.

Love you, too, she thought, blowing a kiss to the note.

November 21, 2000

Dr. Miller watched Kai confidently roll into the room, offering a smile at the receptionist instead of a scowl as she held the door open for him. He carefully maneuvered to the couch where he usually sat, transferring quickly and relatively effortlessly. His leg must be nearly healed, she thought, observing as he gripped the edge of the couch with one hand, then used his other to adjust his wheelchair before pulling his legs one by one until they rested on the cushion, allowing him to stretch out.

He sat like that a moment, as if deciding if he were comfortable, frowned, then shifted his weight, hands planted on either side of his body, pushing up as he glanced around the room. Dr. Miller had the couch, the armchair where she normally sat, then two other chairs, not only to give patients an option, but to provide additional seating for families or couples, or on the occasion where she'd recommend a client bring a guest.

Kai indicated the two other chairs. "Do either of those recline?"

Dr. Miller nodded, pointed to the leather chair that served as third base to the couch's second and her home plate. Kai transferred back to his wheelchair and pushed the short distance to the recliner, locking his wheels. He lifted his feet off the foot plate, planted one hand on the cushion, the other gripping the edge of his seat near the wheel, and started to lift his body. But the recliner spun when it wasn't open, and the action made it turn away so he had to react quickly to sink back into his wheelchair and not get dumped on the floor. He grunted in frustration, adjusted his positioning and grips a few times, but wasn't able to manage it. Finally, he looked at Dr. Miller.

"Could you?" He nudged his chin toward the top of the recliner.

Dr. Miller rose, gripped the top to steady it with his cue.

"Just. Don't let it move," he said, as he planted one hand a little farther back on the recliner's cushion, heaving his body up and onto the edge, quickly gripping the armrests since even though Dr. Miller kept the chair from rotating, it still wobbled a little with his weight. He sighed. "Don't let go yet," he commanded, before using his firm grip to help settle himself back in the seat. He adjusted his legs until they were straight, leaned over to shift his wheelchair out of the way. "OK, thanks," he said as he pulled the lever on the side, using his hands to help press his body back enough to aid the mechanism in opening the recliner fully. As Dr. Miller retook her seat, he finished adjusting his body, settling it until he was comfortable, letting out a long sigh. "I got the all-clear from my orthopedist on walking Friday. My hips and back are killing me," he said as if in explanation.

Dr. Miller nodded; Kai normally didn't explain himself unless she prompted him (sometimes repeatedly), and he never asked for help, either. She wasn't sure if it was simply her limited contact with him, or if it were a sign of improvement. Allowing himself to rely on others—emotionally, at least—was certainly something Kai struggled with.

"That's good news, then, right?"

Kai linked his hands and pushed up above his head, stretching his shoulders and upper back. "Yeah, though it's possible I might never be able to go without the crutches again." Kai shrugged, leaned back in the recliner, almost as if he were ready to take a nap.

"Does that bother you?"

Kai thought about it a long time. "On a certain level, I guess. I worked so

fucking hard after my transplant so I wouldn't need them, and I'm right back to square one." Kai sighed and pulled both hands through his hair. "But I'm walking, and I don't have much more pain than normal, so I'm not going to complain. Plus Re was surprisingly cool about it," Kai added, a small besotted smile slipping onto his face as soon as he mentioned his current girlfriend's name.

Initially, Dr. Miller had frowned on Kai starting a new relationship so soon after his last, encouraging him to focus on school and working through his anxiety, but it had become clear pretty quickly that this new girl was good for him. With her encouragement and support, Kai had been slowly breaking out of his shell, and with a few exceptions—like his stress about his history midterm—his anxiety had been better managed, too.

"So then you've been good since I saw you last week?"

Kai took in a long breath. "Friday, I went out with my crutches for the first time in a long time."

Dr. Miller noticed that Kai didn't seem nearly as restless as he normally was during sessions, making a note. Perhaps that, more than anything, was a sign of improvement.

"With Renee," Kai added. "I wanted her to be the first to see me walking again, plus . . ." Kai shoved his sleeves up, then pulled them back down, giving his hands something to do. Still a little restless, then. Maybe she'd thought too soon. "It was kind of a test," Kai admitted.

"A test?" Dr. Miller wrote that down. It was interesting to hear Kai say that; victims of abuse often tested their friends and lovers, consciously or not, trying to see how much the other person could take before they finally abandoned them.

Kai scratched the side of his nose. "Re's been cool with everything—she even redid her bathroom for me—"

"So you told me last week."

"But the crutches are pretty obvious, and I guess . . . I just needed to know how OK with all of this," Kai waved his hand over himself, extending the circle to his wheelchair, parked and empty nearby, "she really was. You know? It's easy to say you're fine with something in theory, but in practice . . ."

Dr. Miller jotted a few notes. "And did she pass?"

That same smile again, one that somehow managed to seem so natural and yet look so foreign on Kai's face. "Yeah. With flying colors."

"That's good, right?"

Kai's smile broadened, and he nodded. Then he blushed. "We had sex, too. Not vaginal sex, not yet, but . . ." Kai had spoken a bit, at their last couple meetings, about Renee's past and how that affected her issues with intimacy, how Kai was willing to wait but was getting impatient despite everything he'd told her.

"But it's a sign of trust. She trusts you not to hurt her."

Kai nodded. "It's . . . a little weird, you know? I'm used to being the one with trust issues." He laughed, but it was a nervous, self-conscious sound, and she noticed his fingers wandering for something to occupy them.

Dr. Miller kept silent: one thing she'd learned relatively early in her training was when *not* to talk.

"I spent the night. We shared her bed, and had sex again in the morning." Kai's smile was still present, but fading, and Dr. Miller noticed the dip in his brows that suggested the hint of worry. "She says I make her feel safe." Kai didn't bother to hide his

frown. That, perhaps, was certainly a sign of his improvement, or at least a signal that he really was comfortable with her now.

“And that’s bad?”

Kai sighed, closed his eyes. He was quiet for several moments, and she recognized he was doing breathing exercises to try to calm himself. Finally, he opened his eyes again, and though he seemed outwardly calm, worry was visible in his eyes. “I will keep her safe from everything I can,” he admitted. “But I can’t keep her safe from me.”

Dr. Miller lifted her notepad to hide her frown, pretending she was simply shifting her weight in her chair and didn’t want to drop it. “No one can keep anyone safe from everything, Kai. We’ve talked about this.”

Kai nodded reluctantly. “I know. I just keep waiting for the other . . .” His eyebrows scrunched up. “Foot to drop?”

“Shoe. Waiting for the other shoe to drop.”

Kai frowned. Shrugged. “English idioms make no sense.” He rolled his neck. “Anyway, everything is great right now, but I keep expecting Renee to wake up one morning and realize how fucked up I am,” he said with a twisted smile. “And she doesn’t even know about the crazy part.”

“Kai—”

“I know, I know, that’s a bad word.”

“It’s just not conducive to your therapy to keep calling yourself crazy. It has negative connotations. And for someone like you, whose anxiety comes largely from your fear of exposing yourself emotionally to others—”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it,” Kai said petulantly, popping an index finger up reflexively, the ASL for “*understand*,” Dr. Miller had learned. Then, in classic Kai fashion, he changed the subject. “I had a panic attack in public on Saturday.”

Dr. Miller pursed her lips, took in a deep breath, and scribbled a few notes, including a reminder to go back to the subject of Kai worrying about protecting Renee from himself and his continued fixation on the word “crazy” to describe himself. She nodded to indicate he should elaborate.

“Jon knocked up his girlfriend,” Kai said after a long silence in which he evidently attempted to control his anxiety, his breathing consciously slow and deep, as well as figure out how to proceed.

“And this upset you?”

Kai bit his lip—hard—as he thought.

“Kai.”

Immediately, he released it, testing his lip with his tongue—Dr. Miller couldn’t see, but she suspected he’d drawn blood—before shifting his weight in the recliner. Perhaps it was time to dig into her “Kai drawer” as she’d come to call it, and give him some props to play with so his anxiety wouldn’t spike and to ensure he wouldn’t hurt himself.

“I mean, I’m happy for him, really. Jon deserves a family of his own, but . . .” Kai spoke rapidly, almost without taking a breath.

“Kai. Deep breaths. Come on.” Dr. Miller led Kai through several minutes of focused, relaxed breathing until she could see the tension leave his neck and shoulders.

“It’s stupid,” Kai finally admitted. Dr. Miller opened her mouth to protest, but Kai spoke first. “I know, that’s a bad word, too.” He sighed, smoothed a hand over his face. “Jon is going to move out; it’s inevitable. And I’m scared. Scared of how things’ll

change. Scared of being alone.”

Dr. Miller could see, despite Kai’s best efforts, he was heading toward a panic attack, fast. She continued to talk to him as she went to her desk to get him a dose of hydroxyzine. “Kai, I want you to focus on my voice, to follow me to that peaceful place in your mind.”

“I can’t,” Kai said, his voice wobbling.

“Why can’t you?” Dr. Miller asked calmly, grabbing a bottle of water from her mini fridge and approaching Kai.

Kai had his eyes tightly shut. “Because all I can see in my head is me, sick, alone. The more I try not to see it, the more I do.”

“Here,” Dr. Miller said, pressing the pill and the bottle in Kai’s hands. “Take this. Then tell me why you’re alone in your head right now.”

Kai dutifully obeyed, his fingers immediately reaching to peel the label off the bottle. They were shaking, though. “Because Re will leave as soon as I get sick. Because she’s disgusted or scared or both.”

“But Renee passed your test. You still think she’ll bolt at the first sign of trouble?”

Kai hugged himself tight, whether for comfort or as a way to try to stop his trembling, Dr. Miller wasn’t sure. “Everyone else has.”

Dr. Miller decided to leave that for now. “And Jon? You think just because he becomes a father that you won’t matter to him anymore? Even after all he’s done for you?”

Kai moved his head in a way that wasn’t quite a nod but not a shake either, almost as if he couldn’t decide how to respond. “He’ll need to put Vicky and his child first. It’s what you’re supposed to do. I don’t blame him.”

“But it still bothers you.”

Kai nodded firmly, squeezed himself more tightly.

“Are you afraid of dying?”

The question caught Kai off guard, and some of his building tension eased. It was a topic they’d skirted around whenever the subject of Kai’s life pre-transplant came up, or the transplant itself, but they hadn’t really ever gotten into it, partially because Kai always seemed to find a way to artfully guide the conversation away into something that was pertinent enough Dr. Miller let it go.

Finally, he shook his head. “No,” he said, but he hesitated, as if there were more, or he wasn’t quite as certain of his answer as he wanted her to believe.

“Kai?”

Kai’s fingers fumbled again with the flimsy label—it was a generic brand, so the paper and glue were cheap and resisted easy removal. “I’m not afraid of dying. I’m afraid of dying alone.” Kai said it in a, “There, are you happy?” kind of way, and though he tried for a few more seconds to keep his relative calm, he soon burst into tears. “Fuck.”

“It’s all right, Kai. Tell me what you’re feeling right now.”

Kai cried for a few minutes, covering his face, his shoulders heaving, before finally replying, his words muffled but rapid, “Scared. Ashamed. Panicked. Foolish. I can’t stop crying.”

“That’s OK, Kai. We’ve been through this before. Crying can be a healthy way to release your emotions.”

“Crying makes me feel worse.”

“Why?”

“Because I shouldn’t be crying.” Dr. Miller made a few notes about how much Kai raged against tears in particular, suspecting there was more going on than merely his dislike at showing emotion against his will. It was definitely something she needed to explore more.

“Why?”

“What are you, a fucking three-year-old?” Kai snapped.

“Kai.”

He took a few minutes to regulate his breathing. Wiped his eyes on his sleeves. “I have a right to express my feelings. My feelings are real. It’s OK for me to express my feelings.” Kai repeated this a few times, taking deep breaths between each. It was a mantra Dr. Miller had encouraged Kai to adopt to remind himself not to be afraid of his emotions.

“So the news of the pregnancy was why you had the panic attack the other day?”

Kai nodded. He wasn’t sobbing anymore, though a few stray tears still traced down his cheeks. “It hit me so fast. One minute, we’re waiting for our lunch, just talking about the situation, and then I realize he’ll need to move out, and boom. Next thing I know, the only sound in the diner is my ragged breathing and crickets chirping as everyone stares, aghast, wondering if the crazy crippled guy is going to pass out or die or something equally entertaining.”

Dr. Miller stifled a frown at Kai’s usual self-deprecating, sardonic phrasing, and instead, asked, “And did you?”

Kai laughed. “If this is hell, kudos to the guy with the tail and horns.”

Dr. Miller couldn’t resist her own smile as she shook her head. “Pass out. Did you?”

“I came close,” Kai said, growing serious again. “Someone called 911, the EMTs went through the whole fiasco, and I was too drained from the panic attack to protest.”

“And then what happened?”

“Jon drove me home, dosed me up with Valium, and I slept the rest of the day.”

Dr. Miller arched her eyebrows, her signal for, “That’s it?”

Kai sighed. “We talked about it, a little. He promised me that he would always be there for me if I need him, no matter what.”

“And you don’t believe him?”

Kai sighed again, more frustrated this time. “Of course I believe he’s sincere. But one day, not too far from now, he’ll have to choose between me and his family. Either he picks them, or he loses them. It’s inevitable.”

Dr. Miller made a note that Kai clearly distinguished his brother’s girlfriend and future nephew (or niece) as Jon’s “family” while excluding himself. “Let’s put this aside for a moment. You do have friends, though, right?”

Kai shrugged. “Jake doesn’t live here anymore.”

“But what about David? The one you grew up with? Whom you reconnected with on Halloween? Didn’t he help you study for your midterm? Isn’t he modifying his house so you can come over for Thanksgiving? Doesn’t he call you his brother?”

Kai nodded. “I’m supposed to go over there this afternoon to see if everything’s kosher, or if he has to do anything else.”

“You don’t think David would be there for you, in this hypothetical situation where you’re . . .” Dr. Miller glanced down at her notes. “‘Sick and alone’?”

Kai sighed. “He left me before. I don’t blame him, but if I’ve learned anything,

albeit the hard way, it's that I can't rely on anyone to be there when I need them."

A damning admission. Dr. Miller wrote that down and boxed it in. "Do you really believe that? Surely you don't honestly think that of your brother, not after the past four years? And especially the past few months?"

"If you expect something, you're always disappointed. If you don't, you can be pleasantly surprised."

Kai was going for jaded and disaffected, but Dr. Miller saw through him. "Tell me what you're feeling right now."

Kai hesitated, as if thinking about lying before finally admitting, "Depressed. Pretty fucking depressed. And it doesn't help that I know I have no reason to feel that way."

"Have you been feeling the need to self harm this week?"

Kai sighed. "Not really; I've been pretty good lately." He held up his hands, then smoothed down his sleeves on each side to reveal his wrists. "No rubber bands."

"That's really good, Kai," Dr. Miller said, jotting that down.

Kai scoffed. "It's all Re. . . Things would be perfect if I didn't constantly worry about losing her. About her realizing what a mistake she's made, how fucked up I really am, and how much better she could do for herself."

"Do you really think about that 'constantly'?"

Kai sighed. "I think about it a lot more than she could possibly realize." He shifted his weight. "That's the problem: she's convinced I'm this cool, calm, confident guy who's not afraid of anything."

Impression management? Dr. Miller jotted down quickly, underlining it several times and starring it. She knew they were almost out of time, certainly not enough to go into detail on Kai's express revelation that he felt he portrayed one version of himself to others—even those as close to him as his girlfriend—yet believed he was completely the opposite of that persona. She knew already, of course, that expressing himself freely was an issue, but she hadn't quite realized how deep it went—and how it might potentially affect his anxiety. Still, she didn't want to leave him without addressing it on some level.

"So once she realizes the 'truth' . . ." Dr. Miller said, using air quotes, following his logic train.

"Yup. Bubble burst, game over. Do not pass go, do not collect \$200." And there it was, Kai assuming that relationships would all end in failure. She wondered if he realized that beliefs like this could often be self-fulfilling.

"You presume that Renee is extremely shallow, and from everything you've told me about her, she doesn't seem to be at all that way."

Kai seemed to consider this, but said nothing.

"I also find it unlikely, especially in the past few weeks, that you've done such a good job pretending to be this supposed 'other person' that she's falling for him instead of you."

Kai frowned. "What do you mean?"

"People are complex. True, we can't know how anyone will react in a given situation until they're in that situation. But, if Renee has really lived through her previous experiences relatively unscathed—and keep in mind I'm basing this only on what you've told me of her—then she's a lot stronger than you're giving her credit for. Just because you haven't had a panic attack in front of her doesn't mean she'll bolt if it happens."

Kai took this in, his expression unreadable, but not intentionally so. He seemed thrown by the entire concept. Finally, he composed himself. “So now is when you tell me I should sit her down and tell her about my anxiety.”

Dr. Miller nodded. “Keeping it from her isn’t doing you any favors. If you have a dialogue with her, like you did about your transplant and your MLS, then she’ll be able to understand and know what to expect. And, most importantly, it’ll be one less thing for you to worry about.”

“One less thing to be anxious about.” He drummed his fingers on the arm of the recliner. “I’ll think about it.” Normally a phrase that meant “no fucking way,” like when she had first suggested Kai try group therapy (until later, when she persisted, and he actually did tell her “no fucking way”), but this time he seemed sincere. He leaned over to test to see if the recliner closed the same way it opened, with the lever, and grunted in frustration when he realized it was the kind you needed to close with your legs.

Dr. Miller thought about offering to help, but decided she’d let him ask if he needed it. Not only did she not want to irritate him and potentially ruin their good rapport, but she was pretty sure Kai knew his limitations, at least physically. She watched as he used his hands to push his body forward in the seat; once reclined, the recliner no longer moved, which made things a little easier. Making sure to keep one hand gripping the recliner, just in case, he reached out and dragged his wheelchair closer, lining it up before lifting his legs over the edge. He had to be careful his hand didn’t stray too close to the footrest of the recliner, since it threatened to close—not completely, but enough to throw him off balance—from the strength of his upper body. So he readjusted his weight, moved his legs again with one hand, before finally making the transfer, lowering his body smoothly but carefully into the cushion of his wheelchair. He paused for a moment, as if to glare at the recliner before setting his feet in place, shifting his body back, and let out a relieved sigh.

“Remind me never to sit in that thing again.”

Dr. Miller stifled a laugh, especially when Kai used the side of his fist in a powerful thump to shut the blasted thing—which promptly decided to spin around once free of its reclined lock. Instead she said, “Have a good Thanksgiving.”

Kai nodded. “You too.” He hesitated a moment before spinning around to leave. “I can still call you . . . if—”

Dr. Miller nodded. “I’m not going out of town, so if it’s an emergency—as long as your life isn’t on the line,” she clarified, “in which case, go to the ER—you can call me and I’ll try to return your call as soon as possible.”

Kai looked immensely relieved. “I’m not planning on offing myself, but it’s only Tuesday.” Kai smirked, and Dr. Miller knew it was Kai’s way, but it troubled her, and she could immediately see he regretted the joke. “I’m OK right now, really. I just want to know what my options are. Just in case.”

Dr. Miller nodded. “Next week, I want to do some biofeedback and relaxation exercises. If we feel that’s taking too much time, we might want to consider two sessions a week again, if you think you need it.”

Kai’s eyes darted to the side before finally nodding. “I might. Thanks, Dr. M.”

The conference room was uncomfortably warm, and Dr. Ben Johnsen knew for a fact that most of the committee members hadn’t planned to work today, which didn’t bode well for Jon. Still, Jon had clearly put all his effort into his presentation: the lighted cabinets behind him were lined with X-rays and CT films though the light was off, and

his laptop was set up with his PowerPoint presentation all ready to go, the pull down screen displaying the title page in a large, bold font. Jon had also put on his newest, cleanest white coat—likely keeping it in his office in the dry cleaning bag until only a few minutes ago to make sure it was fresh, changing into it from another, more lived-in one. His hair was combed and as neat as Jon’s hair ever got, his tie serious and straight, and only someone like Ben, who’d worked with Jon closely for several years, would be able to tell how nervous he was.

Right now, they had the room to themselves; Jon had arrived early to set up, and Ben had finished his rounds fifteen minutes sooner than planned, so he’d taken a seat he knew one of the committee members wouldn’t use, slipped his briefcase with his own presentation materials under the table, and leaned back to wait while he sipped his coffee.

Jon was organized to the point of being anal, and in addition to his laptop and films had a stack of materials, professionally bound and ready to be distributed to each committee member, plus a rubber banded bunch of index cards that seemed to be color coordinated, perhaps prompts for the speech portion of his presentation. Jon was definitely a “gunner,” a not-so-affectionate nickname for the super smart, highly motivated medical student, so named because they often used “gunner pens”—the mutli-ink kind with the knobs that let you switch colors from the same pen for taking detailed, organized notes.

Dr. J had to stifle a laugh when he noticed a couple of the familiar blue-and-white pens in the breast pocket of Jon’s white coat as Jon gathered up the spiral-bound booklets and began laying one in front of each chair. Unofficially, the seating was first come, first serve, but the committee membership hadn’t changed much over the years, and each person had a favorite spot. Woe betide the young doctor who chose the wrong seat for their first meeting with the committee.

This wasn’t Jon’s first rodeo, though; in addition to the several meetings he’d attended to plead Kai’s case, plus the one several months previously that this one was meant to reconsider, Jon had sat in or assisted on several of Dr. Johnsen’s cases while he was a fellow, and had met with the committee on one other occasion about four months ago for one of his CF patients.

Ben was surprised when Jon laid one of the packets in front of him.

“I made a few extra,” Jon said. “Just in case.”

Ben nodded, flipped through it. Jon was nothing if not thorough, including some of the limited published research on FS—most of it done here at JMH—along with some unpublished data. Dr. J was particularly impressed with Jon’s comparative analysis of the deleterious effects of the FS disease process with that of other transplantable ailments like cystic fibrosis and emphysema, complete with some full color photos, side by side, of several postmortem lung tissue samples from CF patients and FS patients. The pictures, which showed massive fibrosis and destruction of the small airways, were almost indistinguishable.

“This is excellent work,” Dr. J couldn’t help saying, flipping to the back, where Jon had included a list of other material the committee could consult for more information, should they be so inclined. “We don’t deserve you.”

Jon ignored him, double checked he had everything in order for the fifteenth time, and then sat down, anxiously, to wait, trying to resist looking at his watch every ten seconds.

Ben gave up trying to engage Jon in conversation after a couple more failed

tries, and simply drank his coffee calmly, wondering how much Jon was going to hate him in about thirty minutes.

Starting about five minutes before the meeting was scheduled to begin, the first members of the committee arrived, filing in, notebooks in hand, chatting glumly. It was clear that most weren't particularly thrilled to be here, but they all nodded acknowledgments to Ben while at least having the decency to not glare at Jon.

The Jonesville Memorial Hospital transplant committee was comprised of seven members: three physicians, two nurses, one of the in-house lawyers, and a middle-aged woman who Dr. J wasn't entirely sure what her training was, only that she served as a combination of an administrative and social-worker type role, and had for as long as he'd worked here. When she wasn't making life-or-death decisions on the panel, she was in charge of the legion of counselors and other non-medical support staff that helped patients and their families navigate the waters of ill health, treatment, and death.

Once everyone had arrived, including a couple young men in scrubs Dr. J didn't recognize and who were probably either surgery residents or non-pulmonary fellows invited to sit in on the meeting by one of the committee members, Jon began his presentation. As a formality, he introduced himself, thanked the committee for their time, explained the materials he had provided for them, and began.

If Jon hadn't already impressed Ben with his materials and preparation, his presentation did it from the beginning. Jon had changed his strategy completely; instead of presenting more generally about FS, he'd chosen to focus on one particular patient as an example of why the committee should change its mind about universally disallowing FS patients from transplant consideration. By putting a face on the disease—in this case a handsome, if sickly looking fifteen-year-old boy named Martin Gomez—Jon was starting strong. Jon's strategy being it was easy for the committee to reject all FS patients, but a lot harder when they had to look at someone's photo and do it. Jon had used a recent picture, too; Dr. J had seen him take it only a few days earlier. It showed the boy, clearly smiling though his mouth was hidden by a surgical mask, the tubing of his oxygen cannulae leading out from above and beneath it.

As Jon continued, Martin's photo stayed in one portion of the slide while his bullet points slowly filtered in on the other, comparing Martin's presentation with that of another one of his patients, a boy of sixteen named Ivan Swansson with CF, whom the committee had approved to be listed a few months earlier and was already awaiting a match. It was a cunning move, and Jon's passion and compassion for his job and his patients shone through. When Jon had fought for Kai, it had been personal. Though this situation was clearly different, Jon was showing as much care and determination for the rest of his patients as he had for his brother. It was admirable, but also a potential liability, Ben observed.

Jon continued, showing some more comparative slides like the one in his packet, illustrating the pathological similarities in the tissue of his example CF and FS patients. All of this worked up to Jon's smartest move yet: compromise. He acknowledged that he understood if the committee wasn't willing to put FS in the same bracket as more established diseases such as CF, but pleaded with them to at least consider a few cases a year. Jon promised that he would carefully screen his patients and ensure that only those FS patients with the greatest need and who he determined—based on various factors such as age and compliance—would most benefit from a transplant would even be submitted to the committee for consideration.

With a few final slides showing the massive fibrosis of Martin's lungs, followed

by another photo—this one without the mask, showing him smiling despite the oxygen cannulae—Jon made his final pitch. Jon encouraged the committee to consider pathology, rather than diagnosis, when making their considerations.

“A fibrosed lung is a fibrosed lung; the mechanism of disease as to how it got to that state should be irrelevant, if all other factors suggest the potential for a satisfactory outcome post transplant. Patients like Martin shouldn’t automatically be doomed to death because of their diagnosis. I urge the committee to strongly reconsider its previous stance on the issue of allowing FS patients to be considered for listing for lung transplantation. Thank you again for your time.”

Jon paused, as if hoping some of the committee members would engage him in questions or discussion, but none of them did. His presentation had been quite thorough, and Ben felt a flare of guilt knowing that if he weren’t about to go up there and say what he needed to say, Jon may actually have been able to sway enough of the members’ minds to make a difference. In fact, he was tempted to get up and walk out, and damn the consequences, because, frankly, he agreed with everything Jon said, even if he did feel Jon could stand a little more emotional distance from his patients. After all, Kai might never have gotten his transplant if Dr. J and Jon hadn’t had a unified front against the committee years ago.

Shaking his head, Ben stood up, his briefcase over one shoulder, and shook Jon’s hand, offering him a smile. “Whatever happens,” he said, “no one can say you didn’t do your absolute best.”

Almost as soon as Ben booted up his PowerPoint, Jon knew he was fucked. Ben was talking, but it didn’t take long for it all to become a blur. Jon had admired Dr. Johnsen greatly from his first interview as a fellow, and had even considered him a friend—as much as he had friends, anyway. And now all of his hard work—the presentation he had focused on so painstakingly for weeks—was all for naught.

Dr. J wasn’t supporting Jon’s case, as Jon had assumed he would. Instead, he was reporting on Kai, as the only patient with known FS to have undergone transplantation, and he was claiming that it was inconclusive how curative the procedure had been.

“Early on the morning of September 3, this year, Mr. Fox was brought into the ER by ambulance . . .”

Jon’s heart stopped, and he barely managed to catch bits of what Ben was saying. Just shy of three months ago, Kai had stopped breathing, gone in and out of consciousness, was rushed to the ER and kept for observation for several hours, most of those on mechanical ventilation.

“Unfortunately, Mr. Fox declined further treatment, and though I did run several tests a few days later . . .”

Jon stared at the slide and tried to remember this was real and not a nightmare. Kai had almost *died* and he hadn’t thought to mention it? And how was Jon not notified in the first place? Not only was he Kai’s next of kin, he was listed in Kai’s files as his medical proxy. If Kai was unconscious, Jon should have immediately gotten a call. Who the hell from pulmonology had been on call that night? Jon’s thoughts turned murderous as he struggled to not rip his hair out.

Dr. J continued, talking more about Kai’s case and his test results, how Kai’s issues didn’t seem related to rejection, how Dr. J had started Kai on the amphigazol again, etc., etc., but Jon wasn’t able to concentrate on any of it. He’d never felt more

betrayed in his life—by both Ben and Kai—and never felt more sick to his stomach that something could have happened to Kai and he wouldn't have known about it until nothing could be done.

“There's no doubt the transplant has prolonged Mr. Fox's life, and his quality of life, even with immunosuppression, is unqualifiedly better,” Dr. J said, winding down. “However, I must acknowledge that there is still a lot we don't understand about FS, and it is impossible to say how much long-term benefit he will receive, or his life expectancy, excluding post-transplantation sequelae.”

The last few minutes of the meeting passed, the committee announcing they'd reveal their verdict at next week's meeting, and filing out after a few words to Ben, who was packing up his laptop. Jon sat in his seat, seemingly frozen, waiting. Then he mechanically rose and strode over to Dr. J, who had slung his briefcase over his shoulder.

Perhaps he saw the look on Jon's face, his only warning, because he threw his hands up in supplication. “Jon—”

Later, Jon could hardly recall what had happened after the meeting; it felt like a nightmare, like a dream in which his body was doing things he never imagined it would do, but he wasn't able to stop himself. In an instant, Jon lunged at Ben, shoving him against the wall, standing in front of him, arms on either side of the shorter man's head. Kai was taller than Jon, nearly 6'4", but not by much; Jon stood a half a head over the man he had considered his mentor until about fifteen minutes earlier, fuming with rage so intense his vision went red.

“You motherfucker! You fucking cock blocked me! The committee will never rule in my favor now! How could you?”

Though Ben had initially flinched, he leaned against the wall, outwardly calm, looking up at Jon. “I did what I was ethically obligated to do. We don't know with certainty that a transplant is curative for FS patients, and Kai has been exhibiting some FS symptoms recently that he shouldn't be experiencing post-transplant.”

“And you couldn't give me a heads up that you were going to side swipe my entire presentation?”

Dr. J at least had the decency to look contrite. “I worried if you knew it might weaken your resolve. Your case was solid and well argued. Even with the info about Kai, there's still a chance—”

“And Kai. How was I not notified?”

Dr. J made to duck under one of Jon's arms, but Jon shifted to keep him trapped, forcing him to answer. “Just because you're his proxy doesn't make you automatically privy to everything. You know that. Kai was conscious enough to state his wishes: he didn't want invasive ventilation, and he didn't want you contacted.” Ben shrugged.

Jon ducked his head, though he didn't move otherwise. “You've killed Martin, you know that? And God knows how many other kids.”

Dr. J finally lost his cool. “Jon, you're brilliant, you have great intuition, and your patients adore you. You're also incredibly passionate and dedicated to your work. But passion can be a bad thing for a physician. We need to have distance. You forget that, sometimes. This case in particular, this kid—I know you see Kai every time you look at him, and that's one reason you're so determined to fight for him. But it's beginning to blind you. You've gotten on the bad side of a lot of those committee members—including the Chief of Surgery. That could have serious consequences for

your ability to get done what needs to be done in this place.” He pushed at Jon’s arm, which finally dropped. Jon took a step back, releasing Ben from where he’d been pinned against the wall. “I’m starting to worry about your ability to make good decisions regarding Martin’s care.” Dr. J adjusted the strap of his bag, watching Jon warily, though he’d gone back to his calm composure. “I should assign him to another physician.”

Jon stepped back farther, letting the older man walk around him. “Don’t, Ben. Please. Martin has been my patient since I got here. I know him. I know his mother.”

Dr. J sighed. “You need a break. A real break, away from this place. I want you to go home and I don’t want to see you here again until Monday.”

“I’m on call—”

“I’ll arrange for someone else.”

“You don’t have the author—”

The first flash of genuine anger passed fleetingly in Ben’s eyes. “Do you want me to get MacDonald on the phone? Should I tell him how you assaulted me?”

The magnitude of what he’d done hit Jon hard. He could barely find the words to say, “No, sir.”

Kai was sitting in his wheelchair, leaned forward with his elbows on his knees, watching David make a few adjustments to the frame of his master bathroom door. Kai had been surprised by how handy David apparently was, and David had confessed to learning most of what he knew from odd jobs he’d found to pay the rent. He wasn’t skilled enough to make a living at it, he’d quickly realized, but good enough for DIY and the occasional extra cash for a small, simple job.

David turned around and looked at Kai with a frown. “*The door keeps sticking. I might have to try to cut it down. What do you think?*”

Kai shrugged. “*I’ve never even held a hammer. You’re asking the wrong guy.*”

That made David laugh.

“*Look, part of the reason I came over today is I have a favor to ask you.*”

David grabbed a bottle of water he’d set aside and took a long drink, then gave Kai a look that said, “What are you getting me into?”

Kai sighed. “*I’ve been thinking a lot about my mom, ever since Jon gave me that photo—*”

David grabbed his tools, as if to leave and end the conversation, but Kai reached out for him, urging him to wait. With a sigh, David collapsed on his bed, gave Kai an eye roll, then a gesture to continue.

Kai nodded a thanks. “*Jon won’t talk about her. I’ve tried,*” Kai added in response to David’s skeptical look. “*All he’ll say is that I remind him a lot of her, that I’m a lot like her, but then he shuts down. It’s been driving me crazy lately.*”

David frowned deeply, crossed his arms tightly on his chest. His face told Kai, without signs, that he might not know exactly where Kai was going with this, but he thought it was a bad idea. The past was better off forgotten, and one way or another, whether by death or choice, both their parents had left them behind, and the sooner you remembered that and got on with your life, the better off you were. David had said as much to Kai more than once in the past, and his current scowl meant his opinions on the matter hadn’t changed.

Kai continued anyway. “*There’s a room in the basement of the hospital where they keep the records of the deceased patients—*”

As if sensing where this was going, David popped up, shaking his head. “No,” he said, using his voice, one of the few words he knew how to say. Speaking was something he almost never did, but it was a way of expressing how vehemently he was opposed to the direction Kai’s plea was taking him. “No,” David said again, the word inarticulate, but clear enough all the same. He continued in sign, his movements rapid and jerky. *“I’m not breaking into the hospital records just to satisfy your curiosity. I may have been a fuck up when it was just me I had to worry about and damn the consequences. But now I have Megan, and she’s a sweet, innocent girl who doesn’t need to know that I barely stayed out of jail after I aged out of CH.”*

Kai blinked. That was news to him. David had explained that life hadn’t been easy for him after aging out, that he’d done whatever he could to scrape by until he finally got a solid job that let him put his life back on track. But, true to character, David had left out the finer details, and Kai wasn’t exactly known for being an open book himself, so he didn’t push. Now he kind of wished he had. David had always been an expert lock picker and petty thief when they were kids, and had run a mini smuggling operation at County House, getting items for kids on the down-low that they normally would never have had an opportunity to have. Things like lipstick for the girls or dirty magazines for the boys, items bartered, stolen, or bought with bartered or stolen cash. Was that how David had survived on the streets?

Still, Kai tried to convey in his face how important this was to him. *“I would do it myself, but I’m not exactly inconspicuous,”* Kai signed, indicating his wheelchair. *“Especially since everyone knows me in that fucking place. But you could sneak in, snatch my mom’s files, and sneak out, and no one would be the wiser.”*

David’s scowl, which could have melted glass, intensified. *“And how am I supposed to do this, exactly?”*

“Pretend to be an orderly, sneak down, grab the files, and go. I figure if you do it Thanksgiving night, or the day after, when a lot of the usual staff will be off, no one will notice you.”

David rolled his eyes. *“Yeah, don’t you think they’d know if they had a deaf orderly?”*

Kai smiled. *“Put some headphones in and act bored but with a purpose and no one will notice you. Trust me.”*

David shook his head and stormed out of the room, signaling the end of the conversation, but it wasn’t another adamant “no,” either.

Neither Kai nor David had brought up the subject of Kai’s mother’s records again, and they sat together on the sofa, eating pizza. The TV was on, ESPN talking heads going on about the various top college football teams and who seemed to be the most likely candidates to make it to the National Championship in January, the volume off and closed captioning text scrolling automatically on the screen, but Kai could tell David wasn’t really reading it.

David had given up on getting the door just right for now, and everything else about David’s house was pretty accessible. It turned out that Megan had asthma—nothing like what Kai had been like before his transplant, of course—but it meant no carpets, no rugs, so with only some adjustment of furniture, plus the modification to a few doorways and the bathroom, and Kai could be quite at home here.

It was strange, seeing David in his own house, starting a real life for himself, and Kai wondered, vaguely, if maybe he could have this someday, too. Maybe with

Renee.

"You need to eat more than one piece of pizza," David said, gesturing with a crust with one hand while he signed with his other. David had gotten an extra-large, half everything and half cheese, but he'd eaten most of it himself.

Kai shrugged, looked at his half-eaten slice sitting on a plate in his lap before setting it aside on one of the end tables. *"I should probably go home."*

David sighed and rolled his eyes. *"Don't be mad at me because I don't want to be charged with breaking and entering, and who knows what else since this is medical records we're talking about."*

"She's been dead 16 years. No one will care."

David shifted in his seat so he could face Kai better. *"Why is this so important to you? What are you hoping to find in her medical records? I'm sure yours could wallpaper the White House, but would that tell me who you are?"*

Kai sighed. *"I want to know . . ."* Kai hesitated, dropped his hands.

David tilted his head, his eyes urged Kai to finish.

"I need to know if she was treated . . . psychiatrically," Kai looked sheepish.

David shook his head. *"You feel like you're going crazy, and you think if your mom was crazy that'll make things better?"* David leaned forward and grabbed Kai's face, peering into it for a long moment, as if he'd find the real answer there if he only looked hard enough.

Kai pushed him away. *"Maybe if I can understand her, I can understand myself."* Kai reached for his chair, pulled it closer. *"I should go."*

The lights flickered, and David put a hand out to plead with Kai to wait as he rose to answer the door.

What happened next, happened fast.

Kai was debating about ignoring David and transferring back into his chair anyway when he heard a commotion behind him. He turned his head in time to see Jon, a look of fury like he'd never seen on his brother's face before, pushing past David and barreling straight toward Kai. Jon might've had several inches over David, but it was only surprise that had enabled Jon to barge past the stronger man.

"Why the fuck didn't you say anything?" Jon was screaming, and he leapt at Kai, causing them to both fall onto the floor with a thud loud enough David probably felt it.

Kai's head and shoulders slammed into the hardwood with enough force it sent electric tendrils of pain through his joints and momentarily caused his vision to blur. In the confusion, Kai's body took over, knowing he was in a compromised position, that someone was restraining him, that they were going to hurt him, that he had to fight back. His pulse skyrocketed as he shoved against the person on top of him with full force, causing them both to roll onto their sides. Kai registered the thud and whoosh of air as the other man landed hard, and now, free from immediate threat, Kai's brain cleared.

He released his grip on Jon. *"What . . . what the hell, Jon?"* He was breathing heavily, but he hoped Jon would think it was from exertion and not . . . what the hell had just happened? For a split second, it was as if Kai had slipped outside of himself and hadn't quite realized the man he was fighting was his brother. It had to be from hitting his head.

David paced like a caged tiger nearby, ready to pounce if Kai indicated he wanted help, but Kai tilted his head and cast a look at David that said, *"I've got this."* In

the process, Kai saw his wheelchair had rolled across the room, far out of his reach.

Jon growled, pushed against Kai with all his strength, using the ground for leverage and managing to throw Kai on his back again. “The ER. Dr. Johnsen talked all about your little visit a few months ago, which pretty much nailed the coffin shut as far as the transplant committee was concerned. What the fuck is wrong with you? Why didn’t you tell me you were having breathing problems?” Jon was still pinning Kai, though some of his anger had faded, and he relaxed his hold.

“I didn’t want to worry you,” Kai said simply, not liking the way his pulse was racing and his limbs were beginning to feel tingly, like they did before a full-blown panic attack. Kai planted his palms on the floor to push himself up into a sitting position, but Jon shifted his weight, shoving against Kai’s chest with one arm and leaning forward to keep him down. Anxiety flared and Kai shifted his restrained hand subtly in Jon’s grip so he could push against the floor while he took advantage of his one free arm to violently reverse their positions, using his superior weight and strength to pin Jon beneath him, ignoring the way his legs tangled awkwardly.

His body was still on edge, but being in control eased some of his anxiety, though his anger flared to replace it, making his skin hot. “I’m breathing fine. It was one time.” Kai’s nostrils flared, his eyes glinting, wordlessly telling Jon not to fuck with him. “It’s not like you tell me everything,” Kai challenged. “I’m sure there’s been times you didn’t eat or check your sugar like you should, and you didn’t give me a full fucking report.”

Kai expected Jon to give in, but instead, he shouldered into Kai, catching him off guard, and they rolled along the floor, each fighting for control. If David hadn’t already cleared the living room to make egress for Kai’s wheelchair easier, it was likely they would have destroyed it. The two brothers wrestled across the open floor, unwilling to yield, though neither one was able to overpower the other enough to fix their position. Kai was much stronger and fitter, but Jon had the advantage of all four limbs, and he finally managed to use his knees to subdue Kai, getting him on his back again, sitting on Kai’s stomach. Jon utilized all his weight to pin Kai’s arms out at his sides, palms up, crucifixion style, pressing him into the ground.

Both brothers’ chests were heaving, both were sweating, though Kai’s was more from anxiety than exertion. He fought against Jon’s hold, but without his arms and with Jon securing his abdomen, he could do little more than squirm, his body racing toward full panic again.

“Get off me,” Kai said, trying to make it sound like a threat and not like fear. Though adrenaline and determination were making Jon stronger than normal, Kai knew he could displace his brother, though he wasn’t sure he could escape without seriously hurting Jon. Kai’s heart was beating so hard it felt like it would tear its way out of his chest. “Get the fuck off me, now,” Kai said, his voice tinged with anger, though it wobbled, his pulse fluttering frantically in his throat.

Jon’s grip tightened on Kai’s arms, and Kai had to bite his lip to try to keep himself under control. Fortunately, Jon pushed against him, releasing him with a grunt of frustrated anger. “For once in your life, stop being so fucking self-absorbed. The world doesn’t revolve around you. Your actions—and inactions—have consequences,” Jon said, his words harsh, though Kai noticed his voice broke. Jon rose, immediately looking away. Then he stood for a moment, as if trying to collect himself, wiping his face with his sleeve.

Kai lay on his back, propped up on his elbows, the hum of adrenaline still

coursing through his body, feeling dizzy, knowing he would begin shaking any moment and desperately hoping he could keep it together for a few more minutes. He stared up at Jon, grateful he was no longer trapped, but bewildered. Jon was never violent, and he rarely got angry. At least not directed at Kai.

“I’m going to Vicky’s. I may not come home for a while,” Jon said in a cold voice. He hesitated, glanced at David, then seemed to remember that Kai’s friend couldn’t hear anything he was saying, and added, “Vicky wants me to move in with her anyway, because of the baby. Might as well do it now.” Jon adjusted his coat and headed toward the door, past a scowling David. “I’ll have the paperwork drawn up to cancel the proxyship. Might not happen till after the holiday, but if you want your independence, I’ll give it to you.”

Kai’s blood ran cold. He pushed himself up into a sitting position. “Jon—”
“Don’t fucking ‘Jon,’ me,” Jon said, his anger flaring again. “You make your bed, you lie in it. Just remember that Martin will die if the committee votes against me. And it will, now that they know the golden-haired boy isn’t cured.” Jon’s final words came out sounding like he was going to lose his lunch, and before David slammed the door behind Jon, Kai thought he heard heaving sounds.

Kai let the trembling take over, struggling to take slow, deep breaths to get himself under control.

David rushed over to offer Kai a hand, but Kai pushed him away, pulling himself back to his chair and lifting himself up into the seat, relief washing over him as he settled into it, even if his pulse wasn’t yet back to normal, and the tingling still made his fingers numb. Without a word, he hurried to the front door, ripping it open, the cold piercing through his T-shirt and jeans, but Jon was gone, the only sign he had been there the faint smell of vomit somewhere in the bushes.

Kai’s cheeks were bright red, his lips were turning blue, he was shivering, and he was blatantly ignoring David’s shoulder taps and hand waves. So David tried to grip the bar on the backrest of Kai’s chair to forcibly pull him inside, but Kai locked his hands around his wheels and rims, and it became a war of wills and strength, making David grunt in frustration.

David stomped his foot loudly to no avail. Clapped his hands. Used his voice to let out a short, sharp sound that usually worked well enough to get a hearing person’s attention. No response. Finally, he cupped his hands over his mouth and shouted, throwing the air out from deep in his stomach, something he normally would do only if he were trying to get someone’s attention across a large space. Maybe it would snap Kai out of whatever trance he’d fallen into after his brother had stormed out.

David had no idea what the two had said to each other, but he’d seen the hurt and angry expressions on each of their faces, and he’d seen how utterly *lost* Kai had looked when David had finally come out to check on him. The same sad, vacant shadow that had taken over Kai years ago, when they’d both run away from County House hoping to confront Kai’s parents, who Kai had been convinced—at age eight—were still alive. So he could ask them, point blank, why’d they’d left him.

Only, when they’d finally made it to Kai’s childhood home, a stranger had answered the door, and even though Kai had tried not to show it, all his hope had crumpled in that moment as he realized he was alone. David being beside him, refusing to leave him even when they knew the cops and CPS would be by any minute to reclaim them both, to whisk them back to County House, hadn’t mattered.

David let out a less powerful second shout, shaking Kai's shoulder harder.

Kai seemed to finally snap out of it, looking up at David, causing a chill unrelated to the winter weather to race up David's spine. Kai looked like his soul had been hollowed out and discarded like the pulp of a Jack-o-Lantern, leaving only an empty shell. It was even worse when Kai smiled, put a hand to his chest. *"I'm fine."*

Before David could contradict or call him out, Kai had pushed back inside and was pulling on his coat.

"Where are you going?"

"To kill myself." Kai signed with that same creepy, dead smile, and it scared the shit out of David. *"Where the fuck do you think I'm going? Home."*

David blocked the door, ignoring Kai's paint-peeling glare. *"Stay here tonight. The bathroom's ready—"*

Kai inhaled sharply. *"I'm fine. I don't need Jon, and I don't need you. I'm fine."*

David could see Kai's walls crumbling, like he was threatening to lose it at any moment, but he also knew Kai well enough that nothing he could say could keep Kai if he'd already made up his mind. *"Don't do anything stupid,"* David said anyway, doing his best to impart all the meaning he could into a couple signs. Kai and David had never talked about it, and David had never ratted Kai out, but over the years at County House David had occasionally found the razors, the sharp plastic, the glass, whatever Kai could manage to steal unnoticed, hidden in their various caches in the walls or under the floor. And David had discarded them every time, trying to ignore how they'd sometimes still be coated with dried blood. *"Text me if you need to. OK?"*

Kai stared at David a long time, almost as if Kai wasn't seeing him, before smiling faintly. *"Tell Megan I'm sorry I missed her. I'll see you Thursday at ten,"* Kai said, as if nothing unusual had happened. Then he smiled again, the expression pained, before heading out the door.

The apartment seemed particularly empty and forlorn when Kai got home. He forced himself to push to his bathroom, where he dutifully took his nightly meds, including his inhaled medications, trying his best to ignore his reflection in the mirror.

Then, because he felt like torturing himself, he went to the fridge and pulled it open. Tried to pretend his stomach didn't curl painfully in on itself when he saw the vials of insulin were gone. Completely gone. Not even one left.

Something broke inside Kai.

He swallowed, shut the door mechanically, pushed to the far corner of the kitchen. He stared at the kitchen knives in their block, imagining how the steel would feel when he pulled it through his flesh, how easy it would be to aim for something more than a superficial wound. Immediately, he hated himself for the thought. Talk about self-absorbed, he thought bitterly. Instead, he ignored them, pulled himself up on the counter, sitting on the edge awkwardly. It reminded him a bit of Renee, how she did the same thing to reach stuff in the higher cabinets, and it made him smile faintly as he pulled open the one in the corner. He stretched, just barely managing to snag a bottle from the top shelf, where Jon had sequestered it.

Jon didn't really drink because of his diabetes, but he occasionally was gifted a bottle of liquor from a grateful patient's family, and Kai was relieved the bottle of Jack Jon had saved was still there. Kai never drank, either, partially because he didn't much care for the taste of alcohol, partially because of his shitty stomach, and partially because his liver was put through enough paces with all the drugs he needed to take, but

if it was between getting drunk and doing something far more self destructive tonight, Kai'd pick the whisky.

November 23, 2000

Vicky opened her eyes in the dimness of her room and startled when she saw Jon, sitting up in bed, one leg pulled up to his chest, the other hanging off the edge of the bed, his head resting on his knee, just watching her sleep.

“Sorry. I didn’t want to wake you,” Jon said in a whisper.

“What time is it?” Vicky said as she stretched, searching for the clock.

“Too late for night and too early for morning,” Jon said on a sigh.

Vicky laid a hand on Jon’s shin. “Did you sleep at all?”

Jon sighed, hesitated, finally shaking his head as he exhaled. “Since Tuesday night, I can’t fall asleep, and when I do, I have nightmares and wake up. Usually it’s just not worth the effort to try to fall asleep again.”

Vicky reached over and turned on the bedside light, on its lowest setting, just so they could see each other better. Jon had explained what happened with the committee, with Dr. J, how Jon had been unofficially suspended for a week. His fight with Kai, which Vicky suspected was eating at Jon far more than anything else.

“The usual dreams?”

Jon sighed again. “Sometimes. Sometimes I have this one I used to have all the time the last six months.” Jon didn’t need to clarify; Vicky knew he meant the last six months before Kai’s transplant.

She squeezed his ankle encouragingly, saw him smile faintly. One thing Vicky had enjoyed most about the last few months was discovering how much Jon liked to be touched. A hand on his face, fingers on his wrist, a soft kiss under his chin. And how much Jon liked to touch back: lips on her neck, arms around her waist, foreheads pressed together.

“I wake up, and I’m sitting by an empty hospital bed, and I know, in the dream, that Kai should be there, but he’s not, and I panic. So I start searching for him. But it’s weird. Like no one else seems to notice anything’s wrong? So I’m freaking out, trying to push past people, trying to ask them what happened to my brother, and they either ignore me completely, or just look at me like I’m crazy. And I think, maybe I am crazy? But I have to keep looking, so I do, pushing past people like they’re some kind of living obstacle course, and the whole time my heart is racing and I’m sweating, just filled with this overpowering feeling of dread.”

Jon collapsed in on himself for a moment, before yielding to Vicky’s arms, letting her pull him down into her embrace. He curled up beside her, his head on her shoulder, sighing softly. She pressed a kiss to his head.

“Maybe I should call him? Make sure he’s OK?”

Vicky hugged him tighter against her. “I thought the whole point of this was to give you both some distance.”

Jon sighed, like he knew she was right.

“Let him stew for a few days. He’s a big boy. He can take care of himself. And he’s capable of picking up the phone, too.”

Jon laughed, but Vicky could tell it was a reflex and he was still worried.

Gently, she pressed against him, urging him onto his back. Then she climbed over him, straddling him, smiling. “Let me help you get some sleep. You’ll be too busy dodging my relatives tomorrow to think about Kai anyway.” She planted a kiss on his forehead, at the bridge of his nose, on each cheek, on his lips, on his chin, at his throat,

working her way down.

His hands slid along her body, slipping under her nightshirt to find bare skin. “I can’t wait till you’re showing,” he said.

She laughed. “Secret pregnancy fetish?”

Jon looked both mortified and embarrassed, which made Vicky laugh harder.

She kissed the tip of his nose, rubbing their crotches together. Not urgently, just gentle pressure, feeling his warmth against hers.

Jon’s hands explored her belly, her breasts, which were slightly fuller than normal, even this early. “It just amazes me that we made a new life together. It didn’t exist before, and now it does. Isn’t that incredible?” In the dim light of the lamp, Vicky could see the glow in Jon’s eyes, an innocent, childlike joy. And she knew, despite Jon’s reservations about his brother, his perfectly sensible apprehensions about the future, he really did want to be a father with her.

She stilled her movements, a hand on his shoulder, staring down at him.

“What?” he asked, worried.

She smiled, leaned in to kiss him, deep, needing to taste him suddenly, make this more real, loving the way his hands reflexively sought out positions on her body to support her, keep her from falling or sliding or collapsing. “I love you,” she said in a whisper.

Jon froze, literally went still, and for an instant, Vicky worried she’d made a mistake, that it was too soon, even if the baby had accelerated things between them.

But then she saw his smile—that rare, full-faced grin that made his whole countenance lighten and his eyes brighten to a faint, beautiful blue. He laughed, as if surprised, before saying, “I love you, too.” He pulled her down into a deep, passionate kiss, then rolled her onto her back, his arms braced on either side, staring into her eyes, his hair falling down around his face. He kissed her hungrily, every bit of skin he could, before pausing to pull off his tee and toss it aside.

She laughed, nudged him off so she could strip, too, and as they hurriedly tore their pajamas off, Jon never took his eyes off her.

“Imagine if saving lives were as easy as creating them,” Jon mused, snagging Vicky to him so he could feel her naked body against his. With anyone else, it would be weird, but Jon’s philosophic way of thinking was one thing she loved about him. And talking about this meant he wasn’t dwelling on his nightmares.

“That’d make the world pretty crowded.” Vicky laughed when Jon teased one nipple, then the other, gently laying her on the bed before him, his hands everywhere, large palms sliding over bare skin from her breasts to her thighs. The caress made Vicky shake and shiver with pleasure and anticipation, the pressure of Jon’s erection against her leg, urgent.

“Mmm,” he mumbled as he hummed against her belly, kissing down her inner thigh, his breath warm and taunting on her now sensitized lips and clit.

“And we’d be out of a job,” she said on a sigh, stretching and trying to pull him close with her legs wrapped around his waist.

“We’d figure something out,” Jon said, his voice low, hoarse, as he pressed himself closer, teasing at her entrance but not yet pushing in.

She gripped his forearm tight. “Please,” she begged.

Finally, she felt the pressure and fullness as he entered her, deep, in one smooth stroke. “Yes,” she said, reaching for him, needing him to be as close to her as possible, to feel him sliding even deeper.

Getting her cue, Jon smiled slyly, leaned forward, thrusting hard, nipping at her neck.

Vicky's hands traced their way along Jon's back, toward his ass, pressing him closer, closer. They moved against each other, each reaching for their own climax yet working together, touching and kissing whenever their movements brought them near enough to do so.

Finally, it hit them both, within moments of each other, Vicky's vision going white and sparkly, her muscles tensing before they relaxed as she felt Jon's warmth fill her, his body jerk before they finally both went still. They collapsed beside each other, spent and sweaty, their foreheads touching as Jon managed to snag the blanket to cover them both before the chill air could make their damp bodies cold.

"Think you can sleep now?" Vicky asked, smoothing some of Jon's hair off his forehead.

He sighed contentedly. "Yeah. For a little while, anyway."

She watched his eyes drift closed, his body relax, smiling faintly that maybe he'd finally get some rest.

Vicky thought Jon had drifted off when he said in a sleepy voice, "You really love me?" Like he genuinely couldn't believe she could.

Vicky pressed a kiss to his forehead, stretched to shut off the light. "I have for a long time, Jon. A long time."

Kai threw his alarm clock across the room, grinning when its evil blare ended in a shattering of plastic. His mouth was painfully dry and nasty tasting, his head throbbed, and his stomach hurt. When he pushed himself up, his vision swam for a moment before settling. Hangovers officially sucked.

Kai grabbed his chair and transferred, pushing into his bathroom to take his medicine. It was telling how dehydrated he was that he didn't need to pee. But then Kai had spent most of the last 36-hours destroying the Jack, along with a fifth of awful-tasting rum he'd also found in the back of another cabinet, passing out and throwing up as necessary, before turning back to the bottle again. It didn't make him like alcohol any more, and he didn't see himself making the events of the last day a habit, but at least he'd been able to ignore how empty the apartment was for a little while.

Right now, Kai stared at his face in the mirror as he filled a cup with water. He had deep purple circles under his eyes, which were bloodshot, his hair was standing on end every which way, and a hand on his cheek reminded him he hadn't shaved since Tuesday morning. After rinsing his mouth and downing several glasses of tap water, Kai proceeded with his morning routine, something he'd been doing every day for long enough he didn't need full brain power to get through it.

Kai had just finished taking the last of his medicine and lazily recording his vitals in his notebook when his phone vibrated on the counter, from where he'd left it some time the day before. Which was all a bit of a blur, but wasn't that the point?

Kai shut his notebook with a loud thud that made him cringe, but the headache would go away with more water, he hoped. He didn't want to take aspirin, which would further kill his stomach, and Tylenol was off the table if he didn't want his liver to send out a little white flag of surrender. Besides, he probably could use the penance.

Renee's name flashed, and he thought about letting it go to voicemail, but he'd missed her calls most of Tuesday, and ignored the rest of them, so he knew he had to answer. After all, it wasn't Renee's fault he was in a shitty, feeling-sorry-for-himself

mood.

“Morning!” Renee said cheerfully.

Kai grunted as he shifted the phone into the nook of his neck, pinning it there as he used both hands to wheel out toward the kitchen.

She deflated. “I’m sorry. Did I wake you? I thought you got up at seven to take your meds every morning. . . . Shit. But maybe you go back to bed afterward. I’m sorry —”

Kai let himself roll to a stop, freeing up his hand to adjust the phone. “No, Re, it’s fine. I’m up.” He tried to put a smile into his voice for her sake. “I’m just . . . I’m actually not really a morning person. I just have to be.”

Renee laughed, and the sound made Kai brighten a little.

“I’m sorry I missed your calls,” Kai said, pushing with one hand a few feet, then crossing his arm over his body to push the other wheel a few feet until he was close enough to the kitchen to use the counters. “It’s been . . . a busy couple days,” Kai settled on as he pulled open the fridge and grabbed a couple bottles of Gatorade, trying not to look at the empty shelf where Jon normally kept his insulin. David wanted him to show up at ten, since everyone else was slated to arrive at noon, which didn’t give Kai too much time to get himself in presentable condition. And he really didn’t want to pass out from low blood pressure in the middle of a bunch of Deafies he didn’t know.

“That’s OK. I figured as much.” She hesitated a moment. “I miss you.”

Kai found himself smiling. “I miss you, too.” Part of him would have loved to have spent the last day and a half with her instead of exploring a bottle of whisky, but if he was honest with himself, he wasn’t sure if he could have let her see him so wrecked by a fucking fight with his brother and an empty apartment.

“I’ll try to call you later, but things get a little crazy around here once all the relatives arrive and the alcohol starts flowing. I’ll text you, at least.”

“Sounds good,” Kai said, then cringed at how bad that sounded. “I mean, I don’t know how long I’ll be at David’s anyway, so just call me when you can.”

He heard a sound he knew was Renee blowing him a kiss, and chuckled, his stomach warming slightly. “If it’s a Jude thing, though, just text me that and I’ll try to sneak away and call you back. OK?”

Renee sighed softly, her breath blowing into the phone. “At first, I regretted telling you. I’d kept it secret from so many people for so long, I thought it was a mistake, and I wondered if there were a way I could take it back.”

Kai completely, totally understood, but it didn’t change the fact that it hurt a little to hear it.

“But I’m really glad I did. I don’t have that hanging over us, and it’s nice to have someone to talk to about it. Who understands. You know?” He could hear the self-consciousness in her voice, and he wished he could hug it away.

“Yeah.” Kai sighed, shifted the phone. “Look, Re, I . . . I know I’m not an easy person to deal with, for a lot of reasons. . . . Just.” He sighed again. “Thanks for taking a chance on me.”

Renee’s laugh again, warm and lilting in his ear. “I don’t see it as a chance at all, and you know that. I can’t wait till Saturday.” A sound in the background. “Ugh. I gotta go. I’m sorry. Talk to you later! Bye!”

Renee was gone before Kai had time to react, and again, the apartment seemed desperately quiet and empty. He chugged both Gatorades, barely pausing to breathe in between. Maybe David and Megan wouldn’t mind if he got there even earlier than

planned.

It didn't take Kai long to shower, shave, brush his teeth, dress, and down another Gatorade, which still left him two hours until he was supposed to be at David's. He decided to text his friend to see if he'd mind Kai coming over earlier and noticed several text messages, spaced apart from Tuesday afternoon until this morning. Not so many as to be obnoxious, and none of them were demanding, but they all used subtly or jokes to check in with Kai. The last one, sent only about thirty minutes earlier, asked, *You dead?*

Kai frowned, even though he suspected, if David had signed that, he'd have said it with enough levity in his eyes to hide the seriousness of the question. Kai realized the last time he'd spoken to David he'd essentially joked he was going to off himself, so . . . *Dammit*, maybe Jon was right: he was a self-absorbed asshole.

Still live. Hangover, Kai replied in ASL textspeak.

David responded almost immediately. *Megan her mother sister here. House crazy. Now morning Megan her sister burn food. Megan MAD MAD. Now I need go Walmart why? buy new food. You me go together? Please? You save me!*

Kai laughed reading David's texts, able to clearly see his friend in his mind's eye. He wondered if David was really so desperate to escape the family, or if it was his way of checking up on Kai personally. Perhaps a combination of both.

So that's how Kai ended up parked outside David's house at 8:30 in the morning, waiting for his friend to rush out and hop in.

A moment later, David kissed Megan at the door before leaping over and sliding into the passenger's seat like a bank robber making for his getaway vehicle.

Kai laughed.

"When you have in-laws, we'll see who's laughing." But David was smiling.

"OK, this might seem obvious, but I can't sign when I'm driving." Kai gestured to the steering wheel and the hand controls. *"I need both hands. OK? I'm sorry."*

David shrugged. *"My eyes need a break, anyway. I love Megan, but her sister . . ."* David waved his hands in front of him to indicate his sister-in-law-to-be's constant, frenzied signing, puffing out his cheeks to emphasize his exasperation. Then he paused, his face got a little more serious, and he looked Kai over.

"I'm fine," Kai said, a hand on his chest. *"Not being alone today will help me."*

David studied Kai as if trying to see through his defensive walls, searching for any tiny hint of body language that might give away what Kai didn't freely in his signs or facial expression, but, seeming satisfied, he wrinkled his nose, Deafie for, essentially, "I believe you."

Kai forced a small, if genuine smile, shifted in his seat, and put the car in gear. David reclined his own seat and shut his eyes, and though he didn't snore, Kai was pretty sure he slept through the short trip to the store.

Even though it was early, it was Thanksgiving day, and the stores were all closing at noon, including Walmart, so the parking lot was even more of a madhouse than usual. Kai took advantage of being stuck behind a lady backing out an enormous pickup she clearly wasn't experienced driving to nudge David awake.

"Look for a place to park. Ideally a handicapped spot." Four eyes were better than two, and deaf eyes were like a whole extra set.

Kai circled the lot a few times, grunting in frustration at how many of the handicapped spots were taken by cars without plates or permits, wondering if maybe he should just drop David off.

He felt David tap his shoulder, and glanced over to follow where his friend was pointing. An old lady climbing into her Buick up ahead. Kai nodded a thanks and signaled, waiting for the spot.

Even though they weren't able to talk, Kai found he enjoyed the silent company. It reminded him of when they were kids; David knew Kai had trouble signing if he was crutching it, so he'd often shove his hands in his pockets and not sign himself so Kai wouldn't feel left out of a conversation. Though by second grade, David and Kai had gotten pretty good at communicating with each other without a single sign, using only body language and facial expressions. It was a useful skill they'd honed over the years.

The old lady was taking forever, though, and David was beginning to get restless. "*Maybe I should get out and shove her in her car.*"

Kai laughed. Shook his head.

David pouted. Then he rolled his eyes, stuck out his tongue. His way of saying, "You spoil all the fun."

Finally, grandma pulled out of the spot, and Kai snagged it before anyone else could. Once parked, David held up a hand for a high-five, and Kai laughed as his palm met David's, as if they were twelve instead of in their twenties. It felt good. Really good. And Kai remembered what Dr. Miller had pointed out more than once, that he *wasn't* alone, that he had friends and people who cared about him. People he could be comfortable with, like David.

David followed Kai into the grocery entrance, and Kai immediately paused and tilted his head, rolling his eyes.

David dipped his eyebrows.

Kai shrugged. Slipped off his gloves and stuffed them in the pocket of his coat. "*They're playing Christmas music already.*"

David glanced up, as if he could see the music, then shook his head, offered Kai a huge smile. "*Doesn't bother me.*"

Kai laughed and followed David, who'd snagged a cart, toward the produce department, the two of them needing to split up to maneuver through the crowds. Everyone and their grandmother seemed to be frantically snatching the last bags of cranberries and potatoes, and normally, so many people would make Kai's anxiety flare, but right now he was just grateful he had to focus on navigating through the sea of legs and carts, not giving his mind much time to wander.

His stomach started to knot when he realized just *how many* people there were. He knew he should've worn a mask—he always kept a couple in his bag—but it would make signing harder, with half his face covered. And a small voice in his head was screaming gleefully about the danger, the risk he was taking. Probably the same voice that convinced him drinking an entire bottle of whisky and rum (when only a couple swallows was enough to get him drunk) was a good idea, too.

He finally caught up with David, who teased him a bit before going over the remaining items on the list so they could coordinate their efforts and get through the shopping as quickly and smoothly as possible.

Over the next few minutes, the two friends worked together, Kai grabbing stuff at his level and David sticking to items stacked higher up. Finally, they ended up in the baking aisle, David bent over his phone as he texted back and forth with his fiancée, trying to figure out the difference between light and dark brown sugar.

Kai was slinking along the aisle, figuring he'd snag a few of the other list items while David waited for a response on the sugar. He spotted one of the items on the list—corn bread mix—but it was on the top shelf, and even with his long arms, he couldn't quite reach. He knew he should wait for David, but was still stretching out of sheer stubbornness when a hand went over his and snagged a box.

“Got it. Here you go.”

Kai said a reflexive “Thanks,” even though he was a little irritated. As he accepted the box, his stomach dropped, nausea swelled, and he broke out into a cold sweat. “Nikki.”

She smiled, tossed her hair, which was longer, super straight but cut jaggedly, and dyed pale pink with a single stripe of black on one side. Very punk, and disturbingly sexy despite her outfit: khakis with a blue polo, and a nametag. Which meant she worked here. *Shit.*

Kai was desperately trying to breathe and not let this turn into a full-blown panic attack, but it also meant finding English words was impossible.

“I had planned to stay away longer, but I was able to . . . work things out,” she said vaguely. “I like this town. And . . .” She brushed her bangs off her face and looked at him seductively, licking her lips. Kai wondered if they still tasted like strawberries. If her hair still smelled like tropical fruit. “I missed you.”

Kai's face hardened while another part of him did, too. He hoped his anger would change that, quick. “Don't.”

Nikki opened her mouth as if to say something else, when David strolled back over, ignoring Nikki for the time being, and signing to Kai, “*Megan says we need to hurry up.*” Then he seemed to realize Nikki wasn't just an employee helping Kai reach the top shelf, and dipped his eyebrows, glancing over at her.

Kai groaned out a sigh, speaking and signing for both Nikki and David's benefit. “*Nikki, this is my friend David. David, this is Nikki. She's . . .*” Kai struggled for a way to describe what they were to each other. *Ex-lovers? Former fuck buddies? She loved me but I didn't reciprocate so she left?*

“We fucked,” Nikki said with a brilliant smile, offering David her hand.

David read her lips, then looked at Kai, signing “*fuck*” with raised brows to confirm he'd read her correctly. He used a sexual sign, one that implied a man pounding into a woman, two hands slammed against each other, pinkies and index fingers extended, bent interior fingers hitting each other repeatedly.

Kai blushed a fierce, hot red, partially from embarrassment, but mostly from anger.

It was answer enough for David, who laughed loudly. “*Nice to meet you.*” Kai initially refused to interpret, pissed, but after a prod from David, did.

Nikki mimicked the signs, echoing David, “*Nice to meet you.*”

David decided it was time for him to go, so he pointed to the shopping list, then out toward the store, then said, “*Meet you here in ten minutes?*”

Kai managed a nod. Without waiting for David's footsteps to recede, Kai folded his arms tightly on his chest and gave Nikki his most searing glare. “What the fuck, Nikki?”

Nikki sighed, but then regained control. “Your friend's hot. He's really deaf?” “No, he just likes to talk with his hands,” Kai replied sarcastically. “And he's engaged.”

Nikki pouted, nodded. “What about you? You look great.”

Kai let out a harsh sound. Even after a shave and shower, he knew he looked like shit warmed over.

“Did things work out with you and . . . that other girl?”

“What the fuck business is it of yours?”

For a millisecond, Nikki looked hurt, but she recovered quickly. “I know you can’t understand, but I did what I thought was best.”

Kai sighed, put his hands on his rims, ready to back away, but Nikki stepped forward, placing her hands high up on his thighs, leaned down as if to kiss him. “Don’t,” Kai said, but his voice was weak.

So close, he could smell her—the fruity shampoo, a hint of cigarette smoke, and the raw female sex smell that always hovered around her and made his dick painfully hard against his will. His little brain was screaming at him to accept the kiss, and he almost did, tasting her breath, coffee and nicotine and bubblegum. He knew that if he asked, she’d pull him into the break room or even the bathroom and get him off in two minutes. His balls drew up in anticipation. He licked his lips unconsciously, and she was so close his tongue just barely grazed her lips, making a shudder rush up his spine.

Fortunately, his big brain kicked in, snapping Kai back to his senses. He pressed his hand against her just enough to push her away. The momentum sent him rolling backward an inch or two, helping to increase the distance between them.

“Kai—”

“Don’t,” Kai said, more grit in his voice. “Don’t. I’m with Renee now. And even if I wasn’t, you don’t get to just leave me like that, then show back up and expect us to pick up where we left off. You know who used to jerk me around like that?”

Nikki’s friendliness evaporated, and now she just looked guilty. She swallowed, but said nothing.

“Becca,” Kai said, acid in his voice, even though he knew Nikki had no doubts about who he was talking about.

Before Nikki could say anything else, Kai barreled away from her, pumping his arms furiously, navigating around carts and people, making a beeline for the restroom so he could throw up the measly breakfast he’d forced himself to eat only a couple hours earlier.

“*You sure you’re OK?*” David asked, crouching beside Kai just outside the restrooms. He might have been intense, but he was never pushy, not with Kai, so Kai knew he was genuinely worried. “*It’s cool if you want to just blow off today. I get it. I know it’s hard for you to be around food when your stomach’s being shit.*”

Kai smiled faintly, grateful for David again, even if Nikki had sent him back off kilter. “*I took some medicine. It helps with the nausea.*” And for my anxiety, too, Kai thought, since he’d also popped a hydroxyzine. Honestly, he didn’t want to have to deal with people today, but that seemed a lot better than the prospect of being alone in that empty apartment.

David frowned, as if he didn’t quite believe Kai was fine, but he left it at that. “*Can I drive your car? Maybe I should?*”

Kai sighed, nodded reluctantly.

David squeezed Kai’s shoulder, checking Kai’s face one more time before standing up again. “*You really tapped that?*” David asked, using a particularly lude sign, similar to what he’d done before, adding a checkmark in the air and the sign “*FINISH*,” while blowing on his fingers to emphasize that Kai had used her and left her in the dust.

Kai rolled his eyes. *“Thanks for having so much faith in me.”*

David laughed. *“Just saying, you’ve changed a lot. The Kai I used to know would never have even tried to hook up with a girl like that.”*

Kai shrugged, but then he realized if he didn’t say something, David would keep bringing it up, and he didn’t want to talk or even think about Nikki anymore today. *“Look, the deal was, she was just a fuck to get over my ex, after my transplant. Then things got complicated. She left me one night, completely out of the blue, while I was in the hospital. Left me a note saying she loved me but I deserved better, like I can’t fucking decide for myself.”* Kai was trying to maintain control, and they were tucked into a nook out of main line of sight, but he felt himself starting to lose it. “Fuck,” he said out loud, barely resisting the urge to shove the heels of his hands into his eyes. He’d washed them, but he really didn’t want to get some funky eye infection. “Fuck.”

David gave him a moment before nudging Kai’s wheel with his foot to get him to look up again. *“God, I’m sorry. I’m an asshole.”*

Kai shrugged, struggled to take a few breaths. He was *not* going to break down in Walmart, in front of David, over Nikki. Kai was gritting his teeth so hard his jaw hurt, and his eyes were starting to blur, so he shut them firmly. He felt David wrapping his arms around him, squeezing him tight. David’s supportive embrace tightened when Kai did finally lose it and started to sob, powerful, reflexive jerks of his chest like his body was trying to forcibly expel the pain and self-loathing, his mind filled with negative thoughts of Becca and Nikki, Jon, and even Renee. Not letting go until Kai got himself under control again.

David pulled back, his hands on Kai’s shoulders, staring at him intently. His eyes said it was OK, and he understood, and life fucking sucks sometimes, but he was there to help Kai if he wanted it.

“Get a room fags,” a couple guys sneered as they came out of the restroom. David must have seen a change in Kai’s face, because he turned and rose to his feet, his eyes narrowing.

The two guys tossed a few more epithets, but their determination clearly wavered once David faced them full on. David wasn’t the biggest man, but he was broad-shouldered and muscled, plus great at being intimidating. Especially when he was really mad, and he did this hissing, growling thing, his teeth bared like a cornered animal ready to strike.

When the two guys continued their harassment, like a couple of yippy dogs too stupid to back down, David yelled at them, a couple of harsh, inarticulate sounds that freaked the fuck out of the two punks, sending them scattering, muttering “freak” and “fag” a few more times as they left.

Kai was surprised how much that made him feel better—not that he gave a shit about those kids, or what they said—he’d been called far worse before, after all—and not like he couldn’t have handled things himself, but because it reminded him of when David and he were kids, how David really was always there for him, always sticking up for him when he needed it. In fact, Kai had learned how not to take shit from people partially from David’s example.

“I have no idea what they were saying, but I could tell it wasn’t good. You feeling better?”

Kai smiled, took a deep breath, and realized that, yeah, he did. He nodded.

*“Good. Because Megan will serve **me** for dinner if we don’t get back soon.”* He leaned forward, patted Kai’s cheek and flashed a grin, as if nothing had happened, as if

Kai hadn't totally lost it only a few minutes earlier. That was the great thing about David, and why he'd been such a good friend to Kai all those years growing up. When Kai needed him, he was there, always unobtrusively, and no matter what, he never rubbed anything in Kai's face.

It was still relatively early; thank God most of Renee's relatives weren't really morning people, and Renee had offered to do some final prep work while her grandmother showered. She was enjoying the relative peace and quiet of the kitchen, the sun streaming in through the shutters. This house, even more than the one she grew up in with her parents and brothers, had always seemed more like home somehow. She wasn't sure how Kai would manage it, but she was already thinking ahead, looking forward to introducing him to her grandparents and this house, and to the city she loved so much. He'd been in a grumpy mood when she'd called that morning, barely disguising it even at the end, but she'd found it endearing and amusing. Despite his health issues, Kai did his best to convey an essence of "perfection," as if nothing upset him or bothered him, even though she knew that was far from the truth. Hearing him admit that he actually wasn't a fan of rising early—despite everything she'd previously seen to the contrary—was refreshing. As she chopped vegetables in the bright, comfortable warmth of her grandmother's kitchen, she couldn't help images of Kai popping into her head. She saw him, sprawled on his side in bed, his legs tangled in the sheets, his hair delightfully mussed, looking sexy and sleepy, and maybe even grunting and trying to pull the pillow over his head when she attempted to wake him.

She'd been continually shocked that she didn't regret the sex, even the more risqué morning sex in the kitchen, and each night had surprised herself by how much she missed him beside her in bed. Only one night together, his large, long form taking up most of the mattress, the subtle snore of his breath, his arm casually draped around her, protective yet not possessive, and she already wanted that every night. She wanted every morning to open her eyes to his.

She sighed softly and forced herself back to work. She was capable of two things in the kitchen: chopping vegetables and handing over tools or spices, and she wasn't going to let her lovesick daydreaming ruin that. The kitchen door opened, and she assumed, initially, without looking up, it had to be her grandmother, or perhaps her grandfather, searching for more coffee. But something in the air changed: a heaviness that sucked the light out of the room. It was probably the sun going behind a cloud, but it made her look up.

"JP."

Her older brother, at twenty-five, was, by all accounts, a very handsome, masculine man. Tall for their family (and New Orleans) at just a couple inches under six feet, broad shouldered and muscular, with the same dark hair as Renee and Luc, only it had a subtle wave to it rather than springing up in tight curls. He had it cut short, but long enough to part and brush to one side, framing his face and drawing attention to his dark hazel eyes, which were more brown than green, unlike those of his younger siblings. They seemed hard, menacing, and calculating, enough to send a shiver up your spine, but perhaps that was simply Renee seeing in his face what she knew was in his heart. Like their father, JP was cold, ruthless, and manipulative, while still easily slipping into an affable, disarming persona when necessary. It made him an excellent businessman, but not someone you really wanted to share a room with.

"Morning. I see the Great White North has sucked out all your manners," he

said coolly, plucking a pastry from one of the trays laid out on the far end of the island.

“Manners are for people you respect,” Renee responded, ice in her own voice, focusing on her task to avoid his scrutinizing stare. She tried not to think about what JP was doing over at their grandparents’ house so early, suspecting he had come specifically to harass her.

JP let out a sound that wasn’t quite a scoff as he drew closer, practically in her personal space, leaning on the counter and crossing his arms on his chest, accustomed to using his size to intimidate others.

“My boyfriend is bigger than you,” Renee said without looking at him, dumping some diced celery into a bowl and moving onto the next bunch. “So you can stop.”

Now JP laughed. “I heard you were seeing someone up there. Does he ride a horse to school?”

Renee looked up at JP only so he could see her roll her eyes before returning to her work. She did wonder how he’d heard about Kai. It wasn’t like he was a secret, but Renee was really only close with her maw maw and Luc, and she doubted either one of them would have told JP much of anything. “Not everyone is a hick, you know.”

“Well, you never talk to me,” JP said, snatching one of the carrots she had yet to slice and taking a big, obnoxious crunching bite out of it, right near her face, grinning in satisfaction. “When I think of Iowa, I think of corn and scarecrows and guys fucking sheep.”

“I really don’t need to hear about your sexual fantasies,” Renee said, crossing to the sink to rinse some more celery, even though she had already washed everything, just to give herself some space.

“I just want to make sure you’re not dating some loser,” JP said, ignoring her comment.

Renee laughed, a sharp, bitter sound, purposefully shaking off the excess water so JP would get wet. “You’re hilarious.”

This made JP scowl and tighten his grip on his arms. “What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

Renee met his eyes in a challenge, but said nothing.

“I don’t know what the hell happened between you and Jude. He won’t tell me. But you should really grow up already. He’s a good guy, and he’s still crazy about you. Maybe when you’re done playing farm with your little cowboy you’ll come to your senses.”

Renee stiffened, gripping the knife so tightly her knuckles turned white. “I have a knife, JP. Don’t make me use it.”

JP let out a sigh, but she noticed he did shift to the opposite counter, putting some distance between them. He leaned casually enough against it, but Renee counted it as a small victory and willed herself not to smile. “You’re always so melodramatic. Jude’s not even in town. He went with his parents and current girlfriend on some cruise,” JP explained, waving his hand as if to signal how unimportant the details were.

Renee was grateful for the opportunity to regain her composure, focusing on her chopping, taking out her frustrations on the celery. “If Jude loves me so much,” she said, her voice dripping with scorn, “why is he out gallivanting on a cruise with some bimbo?”

JP frowned, but said nothing, as if what Renee said didn’t merit a response. Instead, he took another sharp bite of the carrot and left without another word.

Renee let out a long sigh of relief, grateful for the peace and quiet, the only

sounds the chop, chop, chop as she continued her prep and the birdsong outside the window. The silence was soon fractured, though, with the raised male voices of her brothers exchanging increasingly creative insults at each other. Well, most of the true creativity was on Luc's part, not surprisingly.

"Get back to me when you can come up with something that's not a trite epithet," Luc spat just outside the doorway. JP often accused Luc of being stupid, of only knowing how to do a few scribbles on paper or toss paint on a canvas, and Luc never lost the opportunity to show off his impressive vocabulary. "Asshole," Luc said as he walked through into the kitchen, and Renee wasn't entirely sure if it was a final point to his last jab at their brother, or if it were directed toward Renee about JP.

Renee just shook her head and smiled as she continued to chop.

Luc sunk into one of the barstools and leaned on the counter, supporting his head on his hand, watching her. "Wow, you're armed and JP isn't bleeding. You're a better person than I am."

Renee stuck out her tongue. "Don't make me hurt you instead, Lulu."

Luc groaned. "You know I hate that nickname," he whined, his voice cracking. Luc's voice had changed almost entirely, but occasionally, in moments like this, it'd break, becoming higher pitched. He hated it, especially when he was trying to make a point about not being a child anymore, like now.

"Hey, Little Lulu was awesome." Renee scooped her latest choppings into a bowl and burst out into the cartoon theme, "The clock says seven thirty; it's really after ten. Looks like Lulu's been repairing it again."

Luc tried desperately not to get sucked in, but as Renee started in on the chorus, he couldn't resist, bursting into a smile and singing along, "Little Lulu, I love you-lu just the same, the same. Little Lulu, I love you-lu just the same."

Luc and Renee laughed together for a moment, but his smile faded. "You know Lulu was a girl, right?"

"Yeah, but she was a badass, and she had hair like us, too."

Renee noticed Luc's eyes looked haunted for a moment before he flashed a pained smile and hopped off the stool, hugging her from behind, resting his chin on her head.

"I miss you, sis. I love NOCCA, but I'm so ready to get out of here." He sighed heavily.

Renee dropped the knife and turned, kissing him on the cheek. "Iowa is a million miles from here, but you know you can always call me if you need to talk, right? About anything." She put extra emphasis on that last word, raising her brows. "Anything." She tried to corral some of his bangs, only to have the curls spring out and fall back in place again.

Luc smiled. "Seriously, though. Call me Lulu again and I might have to pick JP as my favorite sibling."

Renee laughed, winked. "Yeah, no way you hate that nickname that much."

Jon was sitting in his car, parked in the street not far from Vicky's parents' house, trying to get himself under control. Vicky squeezed his hand encouragingly. "It won't be that bad. I promise."

Jon laughed nervously, pushed his hand through his hair, which didn't work so well when he was wearing gloves. Apparently, that made the strands stand up crazily, because soon Vicky was laughing, a bare hand reaching into his hair to smooth it back

down.

“If things get to be too much, no one but me knows you’re not still on call. You can always duck out and use the hospital as an excuse.” She flashed him a smile, leaned forward to snatch a quick peck.

Jon nodded, but secretly, he wished he’d snagged some of Kai’s anxiety meds on his way out. It didn’t help that he had that lingering pit in his stomach about Kai. Yes, he was still mad at his brother, but even after the sex that morning, Jon hadn’t managed more than a couple hours before the dreams woke him again.

Vicky frowned at him. “If you don’t want to do this—”

“No, no,” Jon said, shutting off the car as if to prove his point. “I’m just all fucked up with what happened on Tuesday, I haven’t slept for shit, and honestly, I’m freaking the fuck out a little about meeting your entire extended family all at once.”

Vicky smirked. “Eh, it’s like jumping into the cold water. Get the shock over with quick, right?” Vicky pushed her door open and climbed out, so Jon did the same. “Besides? What’s the worst that could happen? Even if they don’t like you, that won’t change how I feel about you, or what we have together,” Vicky added, laying a hand on her stomach.

Jon smiled faintly, but he wasn’t convinced. He didn’t know much about family, but he found it hard to believe that things between him and Vicky could really work if hers decided they didn’t like him. He snagged his bag from the back, with his insulin, syringes, and testing supplies, and locked the car, joining Vicky on the road, since it was salted and cleared, unlike the sidewalks, which looked pretty precarious.

Jon idly observed the houses in this neighborhood, though not brand new, were enormous, almost palatial. Vicky’s family obviously had money. Perhaps not the same kind of money as Jon’s adopted father, but it still surprised him. Vicky lived modestly, and though she owned her own decently sized home, Jon hadn’t thought much of it, since she was older than him, had a well-paying job, and had presumably been single a long time.

Vicky linked her arm in his. “Just don’t mention the pregnancy, OK? My family’s pretty Catholic.” She laughed. “Well, that’s an understatement. It’s better they don’t know.”

“Yeah,” Jon said as they walked up to the front door. “I really want to start talking about our sex life to your—”

The front door opened before they’d even gotten halfway to it, a woman in her early 40s who had Vicky’s face, but was shorter, plumper, with totally different hair, came dashing out. “Vic!” The woman squealed. “Oh. My. God. Why didn’t you tell me your man was so handsome?”

“Uh . . .” Jon felt himself blushing fiercely and hoped that it was cold enough his cheeks were already flushed.

“Jesus, Viv. Can’t we at least get inside? It’s freezing out here!”

“Zero degrees, with the wind chill,” Vivian reported, taking Jon’s hand and leading him in like a lost child, babbling the entire time and making Jon look over his shoulder pleadingly to Vicky.

“I’m Vivian, Vicky’s oldest sister, in case it’s not already obvious!” she said as she pulled Jon away. He noticed immediately she spoke in a very animated way, like she might have been a cheerleader at one time and had never really grown out of the exuberance. “Wow, you have amazing eyes! Are they blue? Or gray?” She stood up on tip toes, leaning way into Jon’s personal space, as if trying to get a better look, and Jon took

a reflexive step back. She laughed. “Here, let me take your coat,” she said as she practically forcibly stripped Jon’s long wool coat off, tangling the strap of his bag in the arms.

Vivian continued to babble as Vicky joined them, removing her own coat and hanging it up on one of several standalone racks apparently brought out for the sole purpose of giving her enormous extended family a place to hang their outerwear. Jon noticed the racks were already pretty full, which meant most of Vicky’s relatives had already arrived.

When Vivian continued to insist on taking Jon’s bag, Vicky finally stepped in, whispered something in her sister’s ear before guiding Jon toward the kitchen.

“Vic, I don’t know if I can do this,” Jon said sincerely. Social situations had never been his forte, and he was already feeling overwhelmed.

“It’s all right. Viv is just a little . . . vivacious,” Vicky said with a laugh at the subtle pun.

The kitchen was enormous, practically commercial sized, and bustling with women, all at various stages of food preparation. More sisters, some cousins, aunts, grandmothers, wives, and Vicky’s mom, though Jon couldn’t tell who was who.

“Hey, everyone,” Vicky said in a loud voice, making the chatter temporarily stop and everyone look up. “This is Jon. My boyfriend.” Then Vicky started pointing to each woman in the group, making introductions, though Jon quickly lost track of names. Finally, a middle-aged woman stepped forward, and Jon knew immediately this was Vicky’s mother. “Ma, this is Jon. Jon, my mother, Margaret.”

She eyed Jon up and down, then stepped closer and put her hands on him, squeezing his shoulder, tapping his cheek, almost as if he were a piece of livestock she was examining for signs of weakness before a purchase. Jon did his best to not step back or jerk away and hopefully not look as terrified and mortified as he felt.

“So,” Margaret said after she seemed satisfied enough. “You’re Catholic?”

“Technically.”

Margaret frowned. “You’ve been confirmed?”

Jon noticed the women in the kitchen had all gone back to their work, yet were still watching the exchange surreptitiously.

“Yes.” Jon had completed his confirmation only a few months before his parents were killed. Neither of them had been incredibly religious, but they’d insisted Jon go through all the sacraments. Sometimes, when his mom was in one of her manias, she’d go to church everyday, fill the house with votive candles, say the rosary over and over like a deranged nun. Once, before Sara was born, she’d admitted the religious fanaticism was a way to cleanse her sins so God would cure Kai. It surprised Jon how much that old memory still hurt.

Margaret was looking at Jon expectantly.

“St. Anthony of Padua,” he responded, assuming she’d wanted to know which patron saint he’d chosen for himself.

Margaret seemed to consider this, frowning, before she asked, “You don’t go to mass?”

Jon looked at Vicky for help, wondering how honest he should be, but she just shrugged. The truth was, Jon had gone to the main Catholic church in town—which happened to bear his saint’s name (though that wasn’t the church his mother had attended), and whom some of the less religious locals referred to as the “Star Wars Church” (an awful pun on “Padua/Padawan”)—a few times during Kai’s final year pre-

transplant. He'd been desperate enough to hope lighting some candles and praying to a God he wasn't sure he believed in would be enough to save Kai. Perhaps the fact that Kai had lived should have turned Jon into a believer, but the sad truth was the church reminded him of Kai's worst days, and he couldn't stand to go back.

Finally, he took in a breath, let it out slowly. "No, ma'am. My schedule keeps me pretty busy."

Margaret seemed to consider this. "You're a doctor?"

He swallowed. "Yes, ma'am. I'm a pulmonologist. Mostly inpatient, but Vicky and I work together in the outpatient clinic."

"And what does your father do?"

Jon darted his eyes at Vicky, who was glaring daggers at her mother, but saying nothing.

"My parents passed away when I was fourteen."

Margaret's expression didn't change. "So who raised you?"

Jon swallowed again. Hadn't Vicky told her mother anything about him? "I spent some time in foster care, then I was adopted. My adoptive father paid for me to go to school."

"So you don't have any family?"

"I have a younger brother." Jon felt himself sweating. Even though the top of Margaret's head came up only to his chin, she was incredibly intimidating. Jon began to see where Vicky got some of her assertiveness, but a warning about the interrogation would've been nice.

Margaret looked around, as if wondering where Kai was, as if he should have appeared suddenly.

Jon glanced at Vicky, then cleared his throat. "Is it all right if I put my insulin in the fridge?"

Margaret didn't immediately respond, still staring him down. Vicky *had* told her mom about his diabetes, at least, right? Shit. Was she going to be offended if he didn't gobble up potatoes and bread and pie?

"I mean, if it's a problem—"

Margaret led him to the fridge, opening it, peering inside for a moment. "How much space do you need?"

"Uh, not much. Just enough for one vial." Jon fished the vial out of his bag and showed it to her.

"Glass?"

Jon's eyebrows knit, but he finally nodded. "Yes?"

Margaret took it from him, examining it for a moment, whether to prove it was what Jon said it was, merely out of curiosity, or what, he wasn't sure. Then she shuffled a few things in one of the doors and shoved it in where it wouldn't be at risk for falling. She pointed, looking at him, to make it clear where it was, then shut the door.

"Thank you." Jon tried not to sound like a balloon deflating when he let out a sigh of relief.

"Is there somewhere we can keep his bag? Somewhere the kids can't get to it? He has syringes in there, and his testing kit," Vicky said, jumping in. Finally.

Margaret nodded, nudged her head toward the top of the fridge, and Vicky took the cue, taking Jon's bag and putting it in the cabinet above the appliance.

Jon was hoping the interview was over, but Margaret looked him over again.

"Dinner won't be ready for another two, three hours. But if you need to eat

before then, just let me know and I'll round something up for you. You won't offend me."

Jon was shocked enough he blinked, looked at Vicky before regaining his composure. "Thank you, ma'am. I'm good right now, but I might need a little something later."

Margaret smiled for the first time and patted his shoulder. "Welcome to our home. Go meet the rest of the family. I have work to do."

Once out of the kitchen, Jon felt like he'd surfaced after being underwater for five minutes, taking in a huge, deep breath. "Fuck, Vicky," he whispered.

Vicky smoothed his back. "Sorry. I probably should have warned you my mom can be a bit . . . intense."

"No shit."

"Were you really confirmed? 'Cause Kai always struck me as the bullshitter in the family." Vicky lowered her voice when she swore, as if her mother would somehow be able to hear, despite the distance, background commotion, and the fact that she was already whispering.

Jon nodded. Thought for a moment, then admitted, "My mom was off-and-on fanatically Catholic, depending on how she was cycling—"

"You did it for her?"

Jon had opened his mouth to say something when Vivian came marching in with six other people. Jon's stomach fell. The men and women looked too much alike for them to be anything other than the rest of Vicky's siblings.

Amusingly, they all lined up in a row, like something out of *The Sound of Music*, and it became obvious pretty quickly that Vivian was the leader. Especially when she tried to nudge Vicky into place with the others.

"I'm pretty sure Jon knows me already," Vicky smirked.

Vivian rolled her eyes, annoyed, and took her own place at Jon's far left. Presumably, they were arranged in birth order, with Vivian at one end and two identical-looking guys a couple years older than Kai at the other.

One by one, each sibling stepped forward, introducing themselves, stating their name, what they did, their spouse's name, and any pertinent information they deemed worthy. There was no way Jon was going to remember who was who, since all eight siblings were apparently "V" names: Vivian, Valerie, Vincent, Vaughn, Veronica, and Verne and Vance—the youngest, identical twins—plus Vicky, of course. Jon wasn't sure where Vicky fit in among the group, but he figured it was somewhere between Valerie and Veronica. Jon noticed all seven siblings—even the twins, who were only 26, they'd revealed—were married with children. Meaning Vicky was the one sole wolf in the pack.

Of the group, Jon liked Veronica the best—the youngest daughter, looking like she was about his age, plus or minus a year or two, with hair just like Vicky's, though she kept it short. The twins also seemed pretty mischievous, and their playful, joking personalities reminded him of Kai, when Kai wasn't hiding behind his thick protective barriers. Walls that kept even Jon out, he remembered bitterly, forcing his emotions not to show on his face.

Jon shook hands with everyone, laughed at a few jokes—mostly at his expense, primarily about his weight, especially since except for Vicky, Veronica, and the twins, they were all a little portly.

Finally, the siblings dispersed, and Jon couldn't help laying a head on Vicky's shoulder. "Did your parents name all of you 'V' names just to mess with poor hapless future spouses?"

Vicky laughed. "Saves a ton of money on monogramming, right?"

They hardly enjoyed their moment together when . . . an aunt? maybe? of Vicky's emerged from the kitchen, looking a bit harried. "Your mother needs you."

Vicky sighed, looked at Jon apologetically. "I'll be right back." She kissed his cheek, and had hardly pulled away when Veronica slipped her arm into his.

Veronica grinned. "I'll watch him for you."

Vicky sighed again, a bit more exasperated. "Behave," she cautioned her sister before dashing off back into the kitchen.

"Valerie, right?" Jon tried. He honestly couldn't have remembered all seven siblings names, let alone which belonged to whom, if his life depended on it.

Veronica laughed. "Veronica. But it's OK. Even our mom never gets us all right." She smiled bigger, to reassure Jon it really didn't bother her. "Maybe it'll help if you call me Roni."

"Roni?"

"Like 'Toni,' but with an 'R.' It's a good way to stand out among a sea of 'V's,'" she explained. "But if you make a Rice-a-roni joke, I might have to hurt you." Roni wasn't as tall as Vicky, who was several inches shorter than Jon, but he believed her.

"Promise to never call me Jonathan, and we're golden." Jon could tolerate being called almost anything that wasn't his name, but "Jonathan" always irked him. There'd been a resident in his medicine program who never ceased to do that, no matter how many times Jon explained that his name was "Jon"; it wasn't short for anything.

Roni nodded with a slim smile as she led Jon through the family room. She didn't stop to make formal introductions to the gaggle of men gathered around a big-screen TV, watching football. Though it looked more like they were yelling at each other than really watching the game. She leaned in to whisper. "The husbands, our father, grandfathers, uncles, and a few cousins." No one seemed to notice them as she directed him toward another room. "Ah, here we are," she said, pushing a door open.

A large enclosed porch, complete with white wicker furniture. It was cold, the room obviously not heated, but the numerous large windows meant it wasn't unpleasant. After the loud stuffiness of the main house—at least the two rooms Jon had seen—kitchen for the women and family room for the men—the sunroom felt delightfully peaceful.

As if sensing Jon's mood, Roni grinned. "Exactly. Plus, it's far enough from the playrooms that you can't even hear the rugrats running around upstairs. I swear, these family things are worth it, if only because the younger cousins watch the brats and give us moms a break." Something changed in her smile as she pushed Jon into one of the sofas. "You'll appreciate what I mean someday."

Jon watched as she sank to her knees and pulled something out from underneath one of the other couches. It looked like a small, soft-walled cooler, which she unzipped only partially, removing a bottle of beer. She waved it at him.

"I shouldn't."

She laughed. "If you want to get through the rest of today, you'll need one. Trust me."

Jon leaned forward to accept it, though he didn't open it, debating. On the one hand, he was between meals, so it wouldn't spike his blood sugar as badly, but on the other, having a mostly empty stomach meant he'd get drunk easier. He remembered the last time he'd gotten drunk, at Vicky's friend's party. Which had led to sex, which, if the math was right, could have been the night he got Vicky pregnant.

Roni laughed at Jon's contemplative frown as she stashed her prize again and joined him on the couch with her own beer. She didn't comment on his unopened brew, twisting the cap off her own and taking a grateful gulp. "Our mom doesn't really approve of women drinking beer," she explained. "Plus, the men in this family drink beer like most people breathe air, and if I didn't stash some in here in advance," she added, gesturing with the neck of the bottle toward her hiding space, "I'd never make it through these things with my sanity intact." She took a sip, then laughed. "Probably not what you want to hear right now."

That made Jon relax, though. Roni was easy to talk to, even if he hadn't actually said much, reminding him of her older sister. She looked a lot like Vicky, too, only she was closer to Jon's age, probably somewhere between 28 and 32, and her face was more open, less serious than her sister's. Maybe a little plainer; not that she wasn't beautiful—put her and Vicky's pictures side by side when they were the same age, and you could easily have mistaken one for the other—but she lacked a certain delicateness that Vicky had. Or maybe it was simply that Jon loved Vicky. He blinked when he realized what he'd just thought, then smiled as it dawned on him how much he really did.

Roni, apparently just as perceptive as her older sister, winked. "So. You and Vicky, huh?"

Jon nodded. Thought about opening the beer again.

"How long have you guys officially been . . ." she shrugged, waving her beer, as if not sure how to finish the sentence.

"Only a few months, but we've known each other for years."

Roni took a long slug of beer. "No shit. I was wondering if you two were ever going to get together."

Jon stared at her.

Roni laughed. She laughed freely, easily, far more than Vicky. "Vic and I are close. Always have been. Maybe because we're six years apart, which meant we never went to the same schools or were dating the same guys at the same time, etc., etc." She shrugged. "Even before . . . this," she said, pointing to Jon and off toward the house, as if to suggest the two of them, "Vicky talked about you all the time."

This revelation caught Jon off guard. Not that it should be surprising that Vicky talked to at least one of her three sisters about her life, of course. But it struck Jon as surprising how much Vicky had apparently been thinking of him even before they'd finally started seeing each other romantically.

Roni laughed again. "Relax, Vic's not nearly as close with the rest of the siblings as she is with me." Then she frowned deeply, which contrasted sharply with her light, relaxed mood that had colored her face previously, and took a long pull of her beer. "Some of them have been pretty shit to her over the years, actually," she remarked, almost as if talking to herself.

Jon sensed there was more to the story. Maybe because Vicky wasn't married? She had said that her family was very Catholic. Jon thought about asking, but he wasn't really sure how. Was it wrong to gossip about Vicky behind her back? Would Jon be mad if Vicky had sat down with Kai at some point to pry out the details of his past? Not that Kai could really tell Vicky anything she didn't already know.

Roni shook her head, planted a smile on her face, as if realizing she was wading into something sticky. "You two are serious, though, right?"

Jon nodded. Smiled sweetly. "Yeah. Yeah, we are."

Roni eyed Jon with a sideways glance, as if debating whether to say something or not. Finally, she asked, "How far along?"

Jon's eyebrows furrowed, and he may have let out a sound like, "Huh?"

Roni studied him, as if trying to decide if he was feigning confusion or not. "Don't tell me she dragged you here without telling you."

Jon blinked. Things had been going well between him and Roni, even if she had been controlling the conversation, but now Jon was well and truly lost. He wasn't sure if it was his cluelessness about the subtleties of communication that women seemed to be masters of, or if it was just his social ineptitude.

Thankfully, Vicky appeared from the doorway off to his right, squeezing his shoulder as she sunk into the seat beside him. "Tell him what?"

The sisters exchanged looks that Jon could never interpret, and the tense silence between them stretched.

Finally, Roni stood up and smirked. "I'm gonna get another beer. You want one, Vic?" she asked, but she drawled the question, raising her eyebrows.

"I'm good," Vicky responded tightly, and Jon wished that someone would just tell him what the hell was going on.

A moment later, Roni returned with her second beer, but instead of retaking her seat, she stepped forward and copped a feel of one of Vicky's breasts, making her yelp, and Jon jump in reflexive surprise.

"What the hell, Roni?!"

"You in your second trimester yet? You're not really showing. Well, except . . ." Roni nudged her beer toward her sister's chest before opening it, pleased as punch with herself.

Oh shit, Jon thought, and immediately looked to Vicky, who was *pissed*. He held up his hands in surrender, still holding his unopened beer, his face desperately trying to convey, "I didn't tell her, I swear!" The beer suddenly seemed like a good idea, so Jon twisted it open and took a long pull. It was harshly bitter on his tongue, but he swallowed it anyway.

Now Vicky was frowning, and Jon wasn't looking forward to being lectured about drinking on top of the already tense situation, but then he realized she wasn't so much mad as upset. Looking at the beer almost longingly. She took a breath, found Jon's free hand, and squeezed it. In a low voice, she said, "I'm about nine weeks." Jon realized Vicky looked ready to cry, and he wasn't sure how to handle that, because he couldn't remember ever seeing Vicky cry.

"You know I won't tell," Roni said, apparently sensing the same thing. "But it won't take long for someone else to figure it out, and then the family gossip train . . ."

Vicky took a shuddering breath, but her eyes were dry. "I was hoping they'd buy my not drinking as being on a diet."

That made Roni laugh. "Yeah, good luck with that."

Jon looked between the two sisters, confused again.

"Vicky's always had the good metabolism in the family. She probably won't even be fat when she's in her last month."

That made Vicky frown, but Jon could feel her relaxing beside him, so he wrapped his arm around her and pulled her closer. He could smell her hair, the perfume of her shampoo, and he didn't resist kissing the top of her head. He felt her sigh, softly, gratefully, and he knew he'd made the right move.

Roni was smiling sweetly at them. "Are you two getting married?"

And the tension was back, at least in Jon's spine. "Uh . . ."

"Roni, stop," Vicky said, but it wasn't her usual firm tone. She sounded tired.

"What? It's an honest question. Even with your figure, you can't hide it too much longer, and a wedding takes time to plan. Mom is going to flip."

"Then let her flip," Vicky said, pulling away from Jon and shifting so she could see her sister better. "I let her rule my life when I was young. But I'm not a kid anymore, and I can fuck who I want, when I want, married or not."

Jon pushed back against the cushion of the couch, hoping he'd somehow finally master the ability to slink into the furniture and disappear. Of course, it didn't happen, and the two sisters continued to squabble as if he weren't there. And this was Vicky with the sister she got along with?

Suddenly, Vicky burst into sobs, and it caught Jon by such surprise it took him a moment to react, pulling her close.

"Vic—" Roni started.

"I need some time with Jon, OK? Alone."

Roni seemed reluctant to leave, but she nodded. "I wasn't trying to start a fight, really—"

"I know. I know," Vicky said, getting herself more under control, wiping her eyes.

Roni nodded and took Jon's beer for him, then ducked out of the room.

The door had barely shut when Vicky was looking at Jon and speaking. "This isn't my first pregnancy."

Jon blinked, not sure how to respond to that.

Vicky continued, "My high school boyfriend knocked me up." Her voice wavered. "I was 16."

Jon squeezed Vicky's hand, did his best to make his face neutral.

"My parents freaked out when they found out, and they made us get married. Right away. So no one would know that . . ." She sighed. "It was stupid, because of course everyone knew anyway, especially in a small town like this, but . . ." Vicky took in another shuddering breath, leaned forward so her head was resting against his cheek, savoring it for a moment. He did his best to comfort her, smoothing a hand on her back, kissing the edge of her face as best he could with the awkward angle. "I lost the baby." The words came out slowly, and when they did, Jon realized Vicky was crying again, so he pulled her close, cradling her tightly against him, kissing the top of her head.

"It's OK," he said in a soft voice.

"I don't mean like a miscarriage," Vicky said, her voice still emotional, though she seemed to have regained some of her calm. "I was at the end of my second trimester, and I went into premature labor, and . . ." Vicky pulled back, one hand curled in the fabric of Jon's shoulder, her eyes looking into his, and the pain there was enough to tear his soul into tiny shreds. "They tried to stop it, but . . ." Vicky's gaze drifted off to the side, going vacant. She shook her head. "The baby was born alive, but . . ." She swallowed, closed her eyes. Jon could see she was trembling now, and he wrapped his hands in hers to still and calm them. "He was too premature. He . . . died."

Jon saw a few stray tears trace down Vicky's cheeks, and he released one of her hands so he could brush them away with his thumb. He wasn't sure if he should say anything. The circumstances, while not entirely the same, reminded Jon of Kai's birth, though Jon hadn't told anyone about that, and now definitely wasn't the time. Instead, he asked, "Is that . . . is that part of how you knew what that last year for me was like?"

With Kai?”

Vicky wiped her nose with the side of her hand, shrugged. “I never really . . . I didn’t think of it that way, exactly, but maybe.” She took in a deep breath. “He . . . he’d be almost Kai’s age now, you know?”

“Vic—” Jon started to say, but his voice broke.

She nodded sadly.

“Did he have a name?”

A few more tears escaped, tracing their way along her cheeks. “Not officially. But . . . I always thought of him as Andrew.”

Jon smoothed some hair out of her face, letting his fingers linger on her skin just a moment longer than necessary, noticing how her eyes fell partially closed as she leaned into his touch. “What happened . . . to . . . your . . . husband?” He regretted the question almost as soon as it was off his lips. “I’m sorry. You don’t have to answer that now.”

She shook her head against his hand. “If we’re going to be a family, then you need to know.” She turned her head enough to kiss his palm, then pulled his hand away and held it in her lap. “I was . . . I was pretty messed up after that. I wasn’t even 18, dealing with losing a baby, and a husband who didn’t want to be stuck with me, especially now that we had no ‘reason’ to be together. And a family who wasn’t the most understanding of the situation.” Vicky’s lips trembled, but she didn’t cry again. “Some said it was God punishing me for getting pregnant out of wedlock.”

“Jesus.”

Vicky managed a wet laugh. “Yeah, I was told more than once that God was pretty disappointed with me, and that my baby was going to burn in hell forever since he hadn’t been baptized.” Something in Vicky’s face cracked, and though she didn’t cry, the pain there was hard for Jon to see. But she shook her head, as if dismissing it. “Chuck. That was . . . my husband’s name. . . . He left not long after Andrew . . .” She took in a breath. “After our baby died, we tried to stay together for a while, but he finally decided the marriage was pointless without. . . .” Vicky shook her head. “He left one day, so I moved back in with my parents for awhile. It took me time to get my head back on, finish high school, all that. . . . And years before I could get a divorce and change my name back. I don’t know what happened to him. I don’t really care.”

Jon leaned forward and pressed a kiss to Vicky’s lips, just a gentle peck, before letting his forehead rest against hers. “I’m sorry.”

She sighed softly, but said nothing more.

“So that’s why you didn’t fight me on the getting married thing?”

She nodded. “My family won’t accept a civil wedding, and I can’t get married in the Catholic church again even if I wanted to.”

“Shit, Vicky, I’m sorry. This is . . . this is all my fault.”

Vicky laughed, pulled away, and Jon was surprised to see her smiling. “It takes two to tango. And that was twenty years ago, Jon. I want you. And I want this baby. Together. And yeah, I want my family to love you, too, and to accept this, but I did what they wanted once already, and . . . I have to do what’s right for me. For all of us.”

Jon cradled her cheek, smiled back. “I might not know much about family, and I might have fucked things up with Kai . . . but I will always fight for you. Even if it’s against a hundred angry Catholic relatives.”

Vicky chuckled, wrapped her arms around his neck and buried her face in his shoulder, as if inhaling his scent to buoy her. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

Vicky sighed softly. “I’m hoping the pregnancy won’t come out yet, but make sure your keys are in your pocket just in case they get out the pitchforks during dinner.”

Jon stared at her, worried for a split second she was being serious, before she started to laugh, and he joined in.

“I’m being extra careful this time,” Vicky said, her hand on her stomach. “The doctors told me it wasn’t my fault, what happened, but . . .”

Jon nodded. “Any appointments you want me to go with you . . . just tell me, and I’ll work my schedule around it, OK?” Jon kissed her again, and this time it got a little more heated, but the passion was more like two souls melding than anything sexual. “Thank you for telling me. I can’t promise I won’t do or say anything stupid, because, well, I’m *me*, but—”

Vicky shushed him with another quick kiss, then pulled him up. “We’d better get back before they send out a search party. Roni will kill me if we give away her secret beer stash and sanctuary. Though I’d better come up with an excuse for the red eyes, quick, before the gossip mill starts up too badly.” Vicky flashed him a grateful smile, reaching out for his hand again, giving it a squeeze. “Probably time you met the men of the family anyway. Come on.”

Despite Kai’s affectionate nickname for the gathering at David and Megan’s house as “Deafie Stray Thanksgiving,” Kai wasn’t the only hearing person in attendance. Besides Megan, of course, there was a college girl named Yve working on her interpreting degree and license who was apparently from out of town and decided the gathering would be good practice. Kai hadn’t caught her full story, because he kept getting distracted, thinking how hard it would be for a deaf person to pronounce that name. Why not spell it Eve?

Besides Yve, there was a middle-aged woman named Suzanne whom Kai vaguely remembered since her son was his age—Michael, maybe? She hadn’t fingerspelled his name, just used his name sign, preceding to talk about how proud she was of him, since he was apparently currently at Gallaudet getting his master’s degree. It could have been the lingering hangover headache (which was mingling with the beginnings of a Zofran side-effect headache), but it seemed almost like she was gloating instead of bragging. *You and Michael were in the same class and he’s on his second degree and you could barely pass two classes this semester.*

She was still signing, though she’d lost Kai somewhere at “*considering a cochlear implant,*” though seemingly oblivious because Kai made sure to nod and sign in acknowledgement every few minutes, hoping she was content enough she wouldn’t expect more of a contribution from him than that. A hand squeezed his shoulder, and Suzanne frowned at the interruption, but David was smooth as ever, apologizing profusely and smiling, though Kai didn’t even catch most of that. He also didn’t fight when David literally pulled him aside, facing a corner, David crouching down in front of him so their signing would be private.

“*You look like you’re about to pass out. Are you OK?*”

Throughout the morning, David had been keeping a surreptitious eye on Kai, as if he expected Kai to break down again at any moment. Still, David knew Kai well enough to keep his distance and not push. If David had felt it necessary to rescue Kai from Suzanne’s diatribes, he must really look bad. But then, Kai normally only had this hard of a time staying focused and concentrating when English was involved, and he’d

been pretty distracted (and distractible) since they'd returned from Walmart.

"Just hungover. A couple aspirin and something to drink would probably help."

David studied Kai closely, whether to attempt to read between Kai's lines, or to give Kai a chance to communicate something without signs if he was worried about being overseen. Finally, David nodded, as if satisfied, and looked about to stand back up when he added, *"If you need to disappear for a while, you can lie down in our bed. It's OK."*

Jon's harsh words of two days before filtered into his mind: *"The world doesn't revolve around you,"* and vaguely, Kai realized it was only the Zofran keeping his stomach from reasserting itself. Again. Honestly, the idea of retreating to David's bedroom, perhaps for the duration of the day, seemed incredibly appealing.

Instead, he plastered on his best fake smile, the one that could fool almost anyone, even those who knew him well, and said, *"I'll be OK."*

David frowned, but patted Kai on the shoulder as he rose, then disappeared into the kitchen, apparently to get Kai a painkiller and a beverage.

Kai stayed, staring at the wall for a few minutes, wondering if he could possibly pull that off at least until David returned when he felt a tap on his shoulder.

He forced himself to not look as annoyed as he felt as he spun around to face the person. A tall 30-something woman who looked shy and uncomfortable, as if she regretted getting his attention. Maybe he hadn't been quite as good at masking his grumpiness as he'd thought?

She smiled awkwardly, and as soon as she made her first sign Kai knew immediately where her uncertainty came from. *"Hi. My name is Emma,"* she signed so stiffly Kai had to bite back a wince.

"You're learning ASL?" Kai had to repeat himself a few times, slowing down each time, especially on the fingerspelling, until she finally nodded.

"That obvious, huh?" she said in English, then blushed, as if realizing her faux pas. *"My son is deaf."*

And you're definitely hearing, Kai thought, masking his impatience in a deep breath. *"Do you have a sign name?"* She didn't get what he was saying, and though it'd be easy enough to explain in English, he didn't want to. If he revealed he was hearing, she might switch completely to English, and his headache would never get relief. So he tried a different approach. It wasn't like he didn't have a decade-and-a-half experience in making himself understood without speech. *"My name is Kai."* Kai fingerspelled at glacial speed, making each letter as clear as possible. *"My name sign is . . ."* And Kai demonstrated his standard name sign, the letter K rolled out from his lips. It had started out partially as a joke at his expense, back when he first started school, since he was hearing but couldn't speak (since the sign meant *"hearing"* because it also meant *"speak"*). But it stuck, and it was better than many of the other names some of the kids called him, mostly under the table, where the teachers couldn't see.

Emma finally seemed to understand. *"NO NAME SIGN,"* she responded.

Kai sighed, wondered if he should correct her. *"NONE NAME SIGN NONE,"* Kai finally signed, unable to resist.

She looked at him, her head tilted slightly, confused. Maybe Kai should leave the tutoring to Megan.

Thankfully, David appeared with a bottle of Gatorade and a couple tablets, offering them to Kai. Kai took them quickly, smiled gratefully at David. *"You know*

Emma?

David nodded. “*Nice to see you,*” David signed quickly enough Kai was sure Emma couldn’t have caught it, then he made his apologies to both of them and headed off to the other side of the room, presumably to continue playing host.

“God, I suck so bad at this,” Emma muttered.

As Kai swallowed the pills and took a long drink to stall, he wondered if now would be a great time to resuscitate his “pretend to be deaf” skill set he’d used more than once in his life, though not recently. He could even further the lie and say he didn’t read lips, though that could potentially backfire. If she thought he couldn’t hear her, and if she was certain he couldn’t tell what she was saying anyway, she might babble even more, and he honestly would rather go back to his eyes glazing over at Suzanne’s signed ode to her son than have to try to block out Emma whining in his ear.

“How old is your son?”

Emma bit her lip, watching him repeat himself, perhaps reading his lips as he did his best to make himself more clear. He was *not* speaking English the rest of today if he could help it. Finally, the light bulb went off. “*Nine . . . er . . . six,*” she responded, fumbling with her fingers, initially confusing her thumb on her index finger, which meant “nine,” for her intended thumb on pinky, meaning “six.”

“Where is he?” Maybe it was a stupid question, but Kai was seriously grateful that—annoying hearies aside—this was a strictly adult-only gathering.

“With his dad,” she explained in her cautious, jerking way. *“Divorced?”* she asked, fingerspelling it.

Kai nodded, then demonstrated the sign, two “D” handshapes meeting together at the fingers, then drawing apart and out.

“Thanks,” Emma signed. *“Megan told me you might teach ASL . . .”* Her face scrunched up as she struggled to figure out how to sign the rest of the sentence. *“Next semester,”* she finished, fingerspelling both words, and if Kai hadn’t been forced into the hearing world, he might have been confused. For Deafies, “next” didn’t mean the same as it did for hearing people. “Next,” to a Deaf person, meant “the one after the one after this one,” rather than “the one immediately following this one.” “Next exit” to a hearing person meant the exit immediately coming up; to a Deafie, it meant the one after the one immediately coming up. Kai had been late on several assignments his first year at the hearing high school until he’d learned that what he considered “next” Thursday was not the same, necessarily, as what the teacher had meant.

Kai had been so caught up in musing over “next”—there he was, getting distracted again—that he’d failed to answer, or even react to her statement. Emma had apparently taken that as meaning she’d messed up and was attempting to explain in various other ways. It finally hit him: Megan had told people he was going to teach ASL? Maybe she could have told him? Unless she had, and he’d forgotten. . . . No way his memory could be *that* bad. . . . But he was doubting himself. His thoughts were scattered, and he had trouble focusing on one thing for too long, especially since his fight with Jon kept trying to seep in between each idea. It reminded him a little of his early days post-transplant, when his memory and attention were shit and he’d been seriously worried that he’d never be able to function.

Emma was waving her hand in front of his eyes now, frowning.

He shook his head, as if to snap himself back to reality. It took him a couple minutes more to remember the topic. Finally, he asked, *“Megan told you that?”* But apparently that was out of Emma’s comprehension. He sighed. *“Why did she tell you I*

was teaching ASL next semester?"

Emma watched Kai's signing carefully, managing to understand him from his combination of slow, clear signs and mouthing the harder words. "*Because you've taught other hearing people before?*" Kai cringed at her use of the English sign "because" instead of structuring her sentence in ASL with a rhetorical "why?," but said nothing. Kai liked Megan well enough; she'd tamed David and dramatically improved Jon's signing in only a few months, but sticking the newbie ASL divorcee on him was cruel.

Kai had taught three hearing people sign: Renee, Jake, and Frankie, his CP "buddy" from County House, who hadn't been there when he'd dropped by for Halloween, but whom The Warden wouldn't tell Kai anything about. He'd be only 16 now, too early to have aged out. So either he'd managed to get lucky and was adopted, he'd been put into a foster home, or he was dead. Despite his CP, Frankie had always been healthy, so far as Kai had known, so the latter option seemed unlikely. But the other options weren't so likely, either, so what the fuck did he know?

Apparently, Kai had spaced out one time too many, so Emma pointed over her shoulder. "I'm just gonna . . ."

And she was gone. Kai was seriously debating taking up David's offer to retreat to a bedroom, maybe try to call Jon and apologize. Fuck. He couldn't focus. It was kind of like a panic attack, but without the sweating and hyperventilation. Maybe this was what losing your mind was like. Maybe that's exactly why the idiom was "lose your mind," as if it were sand slipping through your fingers, slowly escaping your grasp, unable to stop it.

Renee's uncles were fighting; her Uncle Emile had won the dressing contest and now his brothers were accusing him of cheating. They were all drunk, too, which didn't make matters any better, and when she'd finally decided to escape the chaos for a little while, her paw paw and JP were trying to pull them apart.

The weather was even more pleasant today than it had been when she'd flown in; in the low 70s with hardly any humidity by New Orleans' standards. Some of her other relatives were gathered around chairs and tables in the front portion of the yard, or on the back porch, a few of them smoking, but after nearly a week of so many vivid personalities, Renee needed a little quiet time to herself. So she'd retreated to the far back corner of the yard, sitting underneath a huge live oak tree, picking at her plate of food and half watching her relatives in the distance, lost in her own thoughts.

She missed Kai terribly, and she couldn't ignore how disappointed she'd been by how little they'd communicated this week, especially the past couple of days. Although she continued to reassure herself, remember Kai had said he was going to keep busy, it didn't stop the doubt from wanting to surface. But then she'd remember that, as silly and open as Kai could be with her, he was innately a quiet, private person, and they never talked much on the phone at home, so why should this be any different?

"You look like someone just kicked your puppy," Luc said, somewhere nearby.

Renee looked up. Luc had scrapped his low-cut jeans and tight T-shirt of his usual wardrobe for something a little nicer and more conservative, khaki pants and a button-up shirt that hung too loosely on his narrow frame. Renee realized the outfit really didn't suit him. Probably because the clothes had been picked out by their mother. She offered a smile. "Did they have to call the police yet?"

Luc laughed as he crossed his legs and sank down beside her, Indian style, his

plate in his lap. “Oh God, no. Do you know how mortified the parentals would be if that happened? And this isn’t even their house.”

Renee chuckled at that. Sometimes, Marie—Renee’s mother—reminded her of Hyacinth Bucket in *Keeping Up Appearances*, always terrified of what other people would think, especially since Anthony’s family in particular wasn’t from the same Uptown stock as Evangeline’s. (Their marriage had caused quite a stir back in the day.)

The two siblings picked at their food in relative silence for a while, watching relatives filter in and out of the house, though this far back in the yard they were sheltered from the noise and conversations, which were little more than background noise.

“So . . . can I ask you something?” Renee turned to see Luc looking at her, seeming hesitant.

“Sure.” She realized she wasn’t going to eat anything else, so she set her plate aside, hoping it wouldn’t get swarmed with ants, that maybe they’d gone underground for the winter despite the mild temperature.

“How . . . how do you know you like someone? Like, ‘boyfriend/girlfriend’ like someone?” Luc blushed, but he kept his gaze fixed on her, expectant.

Renee smiled faintly, thinking about Kai as she spoke. “Well, I can only speak for myself, obviously, but . . . it’s like, you get this kind of floaty feeling in your stomach when you’re around them, sometimes even when you just think of them. And when they touch you, even if it’s just a casual brush, it feels like your nerves are on fire. And you can’t stop thinking about them. All you want to do is be with them. All the time.”

Luc nervously pushed a few bites into his mouth, chewing slowly, as if giving himself a chance to think of what else to say. He looked worried, troubled. Finally, he swallowed. “How do you know if someone likes you?”

“That’s a little harder,” Renee admitted, tilting her head. “Sometimes you can tell by the way they look at you, or talk to you. Like . . . it’s kind of a starry-eyed look, and a sweet, flirty smile . . .” Renee realized it was really hard to try to explain how you could know someone was flirting with you. “It’s not science. Sometimes, you might think someone’s flirting and interested, but they’re not, they’re just friendly. Sometimes, you just have to take a plunge and ask them out. Sometimes you get lucky, and they’ll ask you.” Renee smiled knowingly. “Is there someone you think you like?”

Luc’s blush spread, and he pushed his bangs out of his face only for them to slide back again. “Yeah.”

“At school?”

“NOCCA.”

Renee wanted to press for details, but decided she’d let Luc tell her what he felt comfortable. “Find something you’re both interested in. Like, maybe there’s a movie you both want to see, or a museum you both want to go to, and you could go together? That could give you more of an idea of whether she’s interested or not.”

Luc stared at her, his large eyes wide, as if he wanted to say something else. He still had that scared look in his eyes, but finally he relaxed into a smile and said, “Yeah, that’s a good idea. Thanks, sis.”

Margaret was apparently super organized, Jon discovered, once they were led to the tables for dinner. The formal living and dining rooms combined into an enormous space, likely normally divided by furniture instead of walls, though every piece had evidently been removed in preparation for the feast. Perhaps relocated to another room,

perhaps put into storage, Jon wasn't sure. In their place were rows of long tables that Jon assumed were of the foldable variety, though they, along with the lines of chairs tucked into them, were covered with festive fabric in shades of autumn. It felt almost like a sit-down dinner for a particularly fancy wedding.

To Jon's relief, it seemed as if each long table was dedicated to a particular segment of the family: one for Vicky's siblings and their spouses; one for the cousins and their significant others; one for the uncles, aunts, their spouses, and Vicky's parents; one for the grandparents and great uncles and aunts. Margaret and Vivian had apparently intended particular seating assignments, but Jon was relieved when Vicky pushed him down into one of the seats toward the end of the table, near Roni and her husband, making escape easy, should he need it. When Vivian began to complain, Vicky explained that because of his diabetes, Jon needed to be able to leave the table quickly. It wasn't really true, but it was one of the first times in his life Jon had been grateful for his disease. He wasn't sure he could have tolerated being "trapped" toward the interior wall, with Vivian at his ear cheerleading throughout dinner.

Jon was also grateful that the children apparently ate somewhere else, since the hum of conversation of dozens of adults was all he had to worry about. Still, Jon was feeling tired and a little hypoglycemic, unable to stop thinking about Vicky's revelation, analyzing and reanalyzing everything both she and Roni had said earlier. Who among Vicky's enormous family had mistreated her? Vicky hadn't specified, and though obviously after two decades wounds had been mended, Jon couldn't help but feel like they both had a huge neon sign over their heads that screamed, *Sex out of marriage! Pregnant!*

"You're sweating," Vicky whispered, squeezing his hand. "You shouldn't have waited so long to eat."

Jon squeezed her hand back. He didn't want to admit that his discomfort wasn't entirely tied to his blood sugar.

Sensing this, Vicky leaned in, kissing his cheek. "Eat, and check your sugar, then call Kai. Maybe you'll feel better after."

Jon nodded, forcing a smile as the rest of the siblings and spouses took their seats, a few of the women remaining standing to facilitate serving. The amount of food, even considering how many people there were, was staggering. And so, so many starches. Jon decided he'd load up on turkey and ham, then take just a taste of everything else.

Once everyone was served, Vicky's father—his name was Peter, Jon had finally learned when they'd been introduced briefly—stood up from his place at the head of the center table—and led everyone in a prayer, ending with the sign of the cross, which Jon found himself going through the motions of even if he hadn't attended mass in a long time.

As everyone sat down to eat, conversation began to flow, and Jon found himself relaxing. Roni's husband Patrick was charming and funny, and the twins and their wives—who made up the rest of their half of the table—were also enjoyable company. Jon's terror over being overwhelmed by strangers and the weight of Vicky and his shared secret faded away, and for probably the first time in a very long time, Jon felt the warmth of real family. This was what Thanksgiving was about, Jon thought, smiling, squeezing Vicky's hand.

But then realization pierced the happy bubble. Kai was Jon's family, and he had said some horrible things to him in anger. And what was one of Kai's greatest fears?

What had he cried about when he'd lost his mind because of Valium withdrawals?

Being alone. Abandoned.

And that was precisely what Jon had done to him.

Again.

Only this time, it had been intentional.

Though Kai had been relieved Megan hadn't invited too many people, there were still more than would fit around their round dining table, so David had rented a couple circular folding tables and some chairs, which Kai had helped him set up that morning. Kai was immensely grateful he'd gotten a seat at the main table with David and Megan and her family, putting him completely separate from the annoying hearies, since all three of Megan's family members were Deaf.

Kai's appetite wasn't great on a good day, and the Zofran was barely keeping his nausea at bay, but as they settled down to eat, Kai realized Megan's family was pretty awesome. A remote part of his mind told him the food was good, too, as he forced himself to eat it without looking like he wanted to throw every bite back up. The vegetarian loaf thing Megan had made for him was one of those foods (like spinach, which he loved) whose sight and scent made his stomach churn uneasily, but once it was actually in his mouth tasted fantastic. And apparently it was really nutritious, too, full of protein and vitamins, or so she told him. He should probably get the recipe, Kai thought idly. Perhaps add a hint of a strong-scented spice (like curry) to distract his stomach.

As dinner passed, Kai was able to see how in love Megan and David were, and how happy his friend was. As Kai picked at his food, looking around their table, seeing the smiles and laughter and signed jokes, he realized this was almost exactly the type of Thanksgiving he'd always dreamed of as a kid. No English, no one forcing him to eat, no one harassing him. Surrounded by the warmth of family and friends.

But the pain of his fight with Jon lingered, of knowing that, at the end of the day, the spell would be broken, and Kai would have an empty apartment to go home to. That Martin would die because of Kai, that Jon might never talk to him again.

But Kai had meant well, keeping the ER visit and all that from Jon, hadn't he? He hadn't wanted Jon to worry. Kai glanced over at David, who was relating a story (modified slightly to take out mentions of County House, suggesting they'd dormed together at JSD) of the time they stole a bottle of cheap whisky one of the orderlies had hidden in the kitchen, and gotten incredibly, disgustingly drunk together. The orderly whose alcohol they'd stolen had been the one to find them throwing up in the community bathroom, but had known he'd lose his job if he reported them for it. Instead, he'd helped convince The Warden it was food poisoning, and David had had the guy under his thumb for the rest of the year he worked there.

A cascade of laughter filtered around him as David acted out the story, and Kai forced a smile, but he was lost in his own thoughts again. Who was he kidding? Kai's motives for concealing the truth were always selfish. Just as they had been then, getting drunk with David, they were now. Kai didn't tell Jon about his recent lung problems because he hadn't wanted Jon to baby him or harass him constantly about being sick. No, it was more than even that: Kai had lied due to some twisted sense of denial. As long as Jon didn't know about Kai's breathing problems, Kai could pretend they weren't real. Could pretend he didn't face a future of struggling for air. Again.

Ultimately, Kai hadn't kept the secret that he might not be cured because he wanted to protect Jon. He'd done it, like everything else he did, to protect himself.

Kai felt tears prickling in his sinuses, clenching his teeth to try to hold them back. Maybe that's all his life was, Kai realized. A series of justifications to hide how truly self absorbed he was. Kai had convinced himself that Becca had left him because his being sick was too much for her to handle, but maybe she'd really cheated on him because he'd been too needy. Too angry. Too selfish.

Maybe Nikki's leaving was his fault, too. She had never treated him like Becca, and yet today he had insinuated she was just like her. Maybe, when Renee left him, too, he'd blame her for it when the only one truly at fault was himself. Maybe he couldn't be loved. Not really. His parents hadn't loved him. And even those who thought they did—like Jon—only got hurt by him. Maybe he really was a horrible excuse for a human being, and Jon was better off without him, free to start his own, new, happy family without Kai dragging them down.

David was laughing at something Megan's father was signing, though his peripheral vision was evidently honed on Kai. David had sensed the change in Kai's thoughts, even though Kai was certain that outwardly, he'd kept up his mask. But David had known Kai for too long. They'd shared too much, could communicate too well with each other through the subtlest of body language. It was possible not even Megan would have noticed the slight alteration in David's eyes or face, or the way his shoulders tensed subtly.

Kai forced his smile a little brighter, shook his head. Then he tapped Megan's shoulder, thanking her for the food and complimenting her again on the vegetarian options, and excused himself. His hold on his emotions was tenuous, and if he *was* going to lose it again, he would do so in the privacy of the bathroom. He wouldn't be selfish enough to destroy Megan's perfect Thanksgiving.

But what is it that they say the road to Hell is paved with?

Kai wheeled through David and Megan's bedroom into their bath. David never had managed to get the door not to stick, so Kai left it propped open as he entered. Immediately, he pushed to the toilet and vomited, his stomach spasming with the urge to empty itself. He felt a little guilty, throwing up Megan's hard work, and the meal, at least in combination, was definitely not "good" food, leaving a harsh, sour taste in the back of his throat. His stomach, at least, felt better. If only the rest of him did, too.

He paused at the sink, sideways, since it wasn't a roll-under (not that he was used to having one anyway) and splashed some cold water on his face, hastily rinsed his mouth. Looking at his reflection, he thought, no wonder David had been keeping an eye on him. Though he didn't look quite as bad as he had that morning—the redness in his eyes had faded, and his cheeks had more color—his eyes were haunted. Kai tried slipping on a few of his default masks, from neutral to "I'm fine" to "disaffected" and back again, but no matter what he did, his eyes didn't change. They reminded him of his mother's, the way she'd stared out from that photograph Jon had given him.

He tore his gaze away from his reflection and started searching through cabinets and drawers. Maybe cutting would help take the edge off, if only for the rest of dinner. He could focus on the pain and it would stop him from losing it, which he felt precariously close to doing. Dr. Miller insisted he wasn't crazy, but it sure as fuck felt that way as his hands trembled, diving through makeup and hair products and—*Jesus women have a lot of crap*.

Kai found David's razor, which was electric, and Megan's, which was the standard safety variety, both of which wouldn't really do him much good. But Kai

couldn't find anything else remotely with a cutting edge, not even a fucking cuticle clipper. If only David had left his tools in the bath or bedroom. Surely, there'd be something there.

His stomach rolled in self disgust, and he felt his chest jerk inward, as if his body was trying to break down—again—into sobbing. Fits that seemed to catch him more and more off guard lately, and which Dr. Miller told him were his body's way of releasing all his pent up emotions. "*You've spent most of your life burying your feelings and projecting others,*" Dr. Miller had said. "*It's like trying to control a river. Eventually, the water will burst through.*" It was an inelegant analogy, but fitting.

Kai let out a scream of frustration, not giving a shit if it was loud enough for the hearing people to hear. Anything to keep himself from breaking down. He'd been alone before. He could do it again. It wasn't such a fucking big deal. Despite Kai's best efforts, fat tears rolled down his cheeks, self loathing sweeping over him. Today was a day he'd dreamed about for years as a kid, and he was hiding in the bathroom, crying like a five-year-old. For no fucking good reason, either.

The heat kicked in with a subtle roar and shift in pressure.

Then the door pulled shut with a loud crash.

And a click.

A click that sounded too much like a lock turning.

Kai's pulse immediately skyrocketed, his head snapping up, looking to the doorway. It was just closed. Not locked. How could it be locked? Kai pushed himself toward the door as fast as he could, nearly colliding with it as he misjudged his momentum. His hands flew to the handle, pushing. Nothing.

Sweat had broken out all over his body, and his palms were clammy, kept slipping off the handle each time he tried to grab it again. *It's just stuck it's just stuck it's just stuck* Kai told himself over and over, but he was beginning to shake, making it even harder to try the knob again. Kai threw his weight into it, slamming his shoulder into the wood, hoping to dislodge it, but it wouldn't budge.

A cry of panicked frustration escaped his lips. Tears spilled out, blurring his vision. *Oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck it's locked oh fuck please*, Kai's thoughts tore through his mind like a river breaking its banks. He threw himself against the door again, harder, the angle causing him to tip out of his chair onto the floor, pain searing up his hip from where he'd hit the tile, but he ignored it. He had to get the door open, *Get the door open get the door open get the door open*.

He couldn't breathe, his chest and throat tight with panic, his fingers clawing at the door. He reached up to try the handle again—maybe the different angle would help—and his heart nearly exploded in fear.

Locks, stacked high, high up on the door where he could never reach them, keys and bolts and chains that were all on the other side of the door. *Oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck*. Locks that were unpickable even if he could have stood long enough to pick them. Locks she'd chosen on purpose so he couldn't get out, never get out, not until she wanted him to, not until he'd learned to be good.

Kai's vision had tunneled, blurred with tears, his breaths hurried, heaving gasps, his fingers clawing at the edges of the door, slipping under it, hoping he could find some way to open it, even though a dim, back part of his brain knew it was impossible. Oh God he couldn't breathe. He leaned against the door, struggling for air, wanting to plead with her but unable to. Sobs stole what little breath he had left, heaving but not getting any air, trembling and shaking and crying.

I'm going to die here all alone all alone all alone all alone. His breathing became more frantic, harried, his mind racing. *I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry.* But the air wouldn't come. The air wouldn't come.

Kai sank to the floor, still gasping, covering his head, trying to make himself as small as he possibly could. Desperately, he wrapped his arms around himself, trying to stop the shaking because he could hear her outside, probably to yell at him, but maybe if he was good and he didn't make a sound, not even a peep from his harsh breathing, then maybe she'd let him out and she could see how sorry he was and how he'd be good and he'd never throw up again or fall or anything to make her mad ever ever ever never again.

When fifteen minutes had passed and Kai hadn't returned, David became worried. Maybe Kai had taken him up on the offer to lie down for a while, but something nagged in his gut anyway. It didn't help that Megan kept turning her head, distracted, her brows furrowing, as if she were hearing something she didn't know what to make of. Dinner was essentially over, a few of the guests retiring to watch football and digest before dessert, so David excused both him and Megan, dragging her to their room.

"I might need your ears and your voice," David explained as they entered their room.

Kai wasn't in their bed, but the bathroom door was shut. David crept closer, looking to Megan, trusting her to tell him if there was anything he should be worried about.

Megan frowned. *"It sounds like . . . he's crying."* She paused, put her ear to the door, her brow furrowing deeper. She shook her head. *"His breathing sounds bad."* She pulled away from the door, worry painting her features. *"Something isn't right."*

David felt his own worry churning in his gut, but he strode to the door, knocked, looking to his fiancée for guidance.

He watched her call out, likely saying something like, "Kai, are you OK?" based on the way her lips moved, though David didn't try to read them.

Megan shook her head, perhaps to indicate Kai hadn't responded.

"Tell him I'm coming in," David ordered. He waited for Megan to interpret for him, then tried the door. It was stuck, but a few effortful pulls finally got it open.

David saw Megan gasp, her hands going to her mouth.

Kai lay on the floor, curled up, his face buried in his chest and legs. He wasn't moving. David's heart stopped. He tried to remind himself that just because he couldn't see that Kai was breathing didn't mean anything.

Megan tapped David's shoulder to get his attention. Any remaining blood she'd had in her face was gone now, her eyes wide. *"I can't . . . I can't hear him breathing anymore. God!"*

Without a thought, David dropped to his knees, rolled Kai onto his back. Kai was unconscious, but when David put his hand near Kai's mouth, he could feel the faintest breath, and his pulse was steady. A momentary wave of relief passed over him, but he noticed Kai's overturned wheelchair, saw the drawers in various states of disarray.

Kai, if you hurt yourself, you son of a bitch, David thought, but as far as he could see, Kai was fine. Just unconscious. With a rush of breath, David sank back onto his feet. He could see Megan watching him, frozen, waiting for him to tell her what to do. He should have her call an ambulance, but he also knew Kai wouldn't want that.

Kai was fighting with his brother, but still . . . “*Call Jon.*”

It had taken some effort, but David had managed to get Kai into their bed, stretched out, his legs propped up with pillows. He still hadn’t woken, but he was breathing OK, so David tried not to worry as he watched Megan talk to Jon on the phone. Kai had explained a little of what his fight with his brother had been about, and David wondered if Jon would let that come between them when Kai needed him.

Finally, Megan hung up. “*He’s on his way.*”

David nodded, feeling some of the tension in his chest unravel. “*I’ll sit with him. Go take care of our guests. I’ll shout if I need you.*”

Megan hesitated, but she finally nodded. “*I’ll start encouraging people to go home.*” With one more reluctant look, she eased out the door, shutting it behind her.

David checked Kai’s pulse again, just to ensure he was still OK—or at least as OK as he could be under the circumstances. He settled back to keep an all-too-familiar watch, his eyes fixed on Kai’s chest, tracking its slow but even rise and fall.

County House was divided into three wards. The first, the “indies” as David and Kai called them and where their room was, was for the kids who were more or less independent. Like Kai, some of the kids might need help occasionally, but for the most part, they could function on their own. Dress themselves, bathe themselves, etc. The second was for the more severely disabled kids, the “DPTs,” as David and Kai had called them, kids who were dependent on orderlies to help them with basic tasks, especially in the morning and evenings, but who otherwise, once they were in their wheelchairs or whatever, could be OK more or less on their own. Then there was the third ward, the “sickies,” as David had nicknamed them, even though Kai didn’t like the term. It was for the few kids who needed nursing care—not just an orderly or a volunteer, but an actual nurse—to care for them. There weren’t many of them at CH, since most of those types of kids were sent south, and CH only had one to two nurses on the clock per shift. But it was also where some of the kids—like Kai—were treated when they got sick, if things weren’t serious enough they needed to be hospitalized.

Kai often would end up there at night, if his breathing was bad enough he needed closer monitoring or oxygen, but not so bad they needed an ambulance to race him to the hospital. Technically, David wasn’t allowed back there, but after The Warden realized short of barricading David in his room, she couldn’t keep him from sneaking in there to be with Kai, she allowed it. So David spent many nights, forcing himself to stay awake as he sat beside Kai’s bed, watching him, keeping vigil over the rise and fall of his chest, worried that if he fell asleep, Kai might stop breathing.

Jon struggled to find a place to park; apparently quite a few Deafies had flocked to Megan’s house for Thanksgiving dinner. Finally, he found a spot a few blocks over, not incredibly thrilled about trekking through the road, the icy wind biting his exposed skin. Kai’s car was parked in the driveway, and Jon’s anger spiked. As worried as he’d been the past couple days, he was still mad at Kai, for lying to him, for ruining the potential chance for dozens of other FS patients, and he was mad that he couldn’t even be mad if Kai was sick.

He grunted, adjusted the strap of his medical bag. When Jon finished his second year of medical school, his adoptive father had given him a traditional, old-fashioned leather open-mouthed bag. However, Jon had quickly replaced it with a more practical, modern fabric zippered version, more like the kind of bag an EMT carried.

Inside, he always kept a spare stethoscope, a simple sphygmomanometer, a pulse oximeter, several doses of various nebulizer solutions, a couple new albuterol inhalers, and an epipen, plus a few bandages and other basic first aid supplies.

As annoyed and pissed as it would make him, while Jon walked to the front door, he secretly prayed that Kai was fine, that this was all some elaborate prank to get back at him. Jon pressed the doorbell. But he had heard the fear in Megan's voice, and though Jon could see pulling David into the fiasco, it didn't seem like Kai to drag her into it as well.

A moment later, the door opened, a middle-aged man who had Megan's eyes answering. "*Dr. Taylor?*" Perhaps Megan had posted her father to answer the door.

Jon nodded, grateful he wasn't going to have to come off as rude by skipping through the normal Deafie greeting rituals so he could get straight to the point. The man signaled across the room, and soon Megan appeared, looking pale and worried.

"*Thank God you're here,*" she signed and spoke.

Jon sighed, his emotions swirling inside him while he used his training to keep him outwardly calm. He knew it was rude to speak, uninterpreted, in a room full of Deafies, but honestly, at this point, Jon didn't care. English was easier and faster right now. "Where is he?"

Megan blinked for a moment, the interpreter in her nearly transposing his English into signs, before she finally replied, in unsigned English, "In our bedroom."

Jon nodded and indicated for her to show him the way. "What happened?" he asked as they made their way through the crowded front rooms into a hallway.

Megan shook her head. "I don't know. I thought I heard screaming and crying. When we got the bathroom open, Kai was unconscious."

Jon frowned as Megan led him into the bedroom. Kai was laid out on their bed, David sitting beside him, watching him like a guard dog. He didn't seem to notice them, so Megan walked until he caught her in his peripheral vision, glancing up. He scowled at Jon for a moment but signed nothing.

Jon slipped off his bag, his eyes taking in Kai. His color was good, his lips weren't blue, and his breathing, from a casual, fifteen-second check, was within the normal range for sleep, slow and even. Convinced this didn't seem to be an emergency, Jon began unpacking his bag.

"Do you have any ammonia?"

David glared at him for speaking unsigned, but Jon ignored him.

"Like, for cleaning. Ammonia, or something that has ammonia in it," Jon barked as he wrapped the blood pressure cuff around one of Kai's arms.

"Uh, I'm not sure," Megan said.

Jon saw Megan and David signing to each other, but he focused on checking Kai's blood pressure, something he hadn't done manually in years, so it took him a couple of tries. It was on the low end of normal for Kai. Jon removed the cuff as he noticed David hop off the bed and disappear.

Jon slipped the pulse ox on Kai's finger, then tossed the sphygmomanometer in his bag. Kai's pulse was fine, as was his PO₂, so based on the limited information Megan had given him, Jon had to suspect Kai had had a panic attack and hyperventilated until he lost consciousness. Still, to be thorough, Jon listened to Kai's lungs as well as he could, then his heart, both of which sounded fine, although Jon bemoaned his real, good stethoscope, the one he normally used daily, and which was infinitely better than this cheap one he kept in his kit.

Jon heard the bedroom door open and close, and soon David appeared at his side, offering him a bottle of cleaner with a scowl. His expression could certainly rival one of Kai's worst, and Jon suspected David must not like him very much. Jon had to admit that attacking Kai in the guy's living room probably didn't earn him any brownie points, not that Jon really cared. It probably didn't help that David's deafness meant he would have only gotten Kai's side of the story, and who knew how Kai had spun it. Maybe Kai had David convinced Jon was evil incarnate. Still, whatever bias David had against Jon, it hadn't kept it him from summoning Jon to Kai.

Jon accepted the bottle, opened it, and took a hesitant sniff, his nose immediately scrunching up from the strong odor of ammonia. He nodded a kind of thanks to David, grabbing some cotton from his kit, soaking them in the solution. He capped the bottle, then waved the soaked swabs under Kai's nostrils back and forth and back and forth until Kai's eyes shot open with a start.

"Welcome back," Jon said, his voice tight. Though he was secretly relieved Kai was OK, his lingering anger wouldn't let him admit it.

Kai coughed, braced his hands on the bed, muscles tense, as if readying himself to move, his chest jerking, eyes wide with confused panic. He glanced around the room before shutting his eyes, covering his face with his hands and obviously consciously trying to calm himself down.

Jon took out a pen light from his kit, pulling Kai's hands away to check his pupillary response, since no one could be sure if Kai had hit his head when he'd fallen. They were normal, but Jon didn't like the way Kai looked at him when the light was taken away. Almost like he didn't recognize his brother.

Jon forced himself to ask the basic orientation questions, to be a doctor instead of a brother for a few more minutes. "Can you tell me your name?"

Kai ignored the question, pushing himself up without help. A tremble coursed through Kai's entire body, and his eyes filled. "Jon?" For a moment, Jon worried, until Kai threw his arms around him, hugging him tight. "I'm sorry."

It was Jon's turn to be confused, as Jon hugged Kai back for a few minutes, listening to Kai pleading in his ear a chorus of apology and gratitude.

Finally, Kai pulled back, his hands still on Jon's shoulders. "You're here." Kai's eyes were glossy, but full of such overpowering relief, almost as if Kai had believed he would never see Jon again.

Jon frowned.

Kai sighed and recited his name, the date, and a few other facts to convince Jon he was fine. As he did so, Jon noticed Kai's emotionality of first waking had been shored up, though Jon knew it was still there, lingering under the surface.

"Can you tell me what happened?" Jon asked in his clinical, detached doctor voice. Jon tried not to focus on how lost and scared, yet grateful Kai had looked when he'd realized despite everything, Jon had still come to make sure he was OK.

Kai looked from Jon to Megan to David and shook his head. Jon could see his brother's hastily painted veneer of calm chipping.

"You passed out in the bathroom," Jon prompted. "Do you remember that?"

Kai's eyes drifted to the bathroom door. His lip trembled. "That wasn't a dream, was it?" Kai buried his face in his hands. "Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck," he muttered, his breathing beginning to grow fast and shallow.

David looked at Jon, as if trying to impart an encyclopedia's worth of information with just his eyes and brows, his eyes darting to Megan. Picking up on his

cue, Jon rose and pulled Megan to the side.

Jon laid a hand on Megan's arm, comforting her the way he might a patient's family member. "He's fine. It was probably his blood pressure," Jon lied, though as he did so, he wasn't entirely sure why. He was fucking sick of secrets: Kai's, Vicky's. His mother's, if he was really honest with himself. But maybe the doctor in him, who was bound not to share patient information—not that Kai was his patient anyway—directed his tongue. Besides, Kai had been upset enough about his panic attacks in the exam room and at the diner. The less people who knew about his anxiety, the less Kai would stress. And whatever had happened today, maybe it was partially Jon's fault. Jon knew how much being abandoned terrified Kai, and yet he had walked out on him, going so far as to take most of his diabetes supplies with him when he'd left.

Jon glanced over Megan's shoulder, where he saw Kai, huddled and trembling, nodding and shaking his head occasionally in response to David's signs, but otherwise, shut down. Jon's remaining anger fled his body as he coaxed Megan out the door. He had promised Kai, renewing that promise recently, that he would always be there for his brother, always be around when Kai needed him. And Kai needed him now.

Jon nudged Kai's feet out of the way, sitting on the bed in front of his brother. "Tell me what you remember," Jon said in a soft voice, gentle, the way he'd speak to one of his spooked younger patients. Nonthreatening, friendly.

Kai turned his head from David to Jon's, and it was painful to see how hard Kai was struggling to keep it together, how any second his enforced calm was going to shatter. "It . . . it was like a nightmare. Only . . ." Kai took in a breath with enormous effort. "Only I was awake." Kai's lip trembled, his mask dropped, but Jon only saw it for a second before Kai buried his face in his knees, clutching them tightly to his chest as if trying to make himself as small as possible.

David jammed his fingers into Kai's shoulder, perhaps annoyed by all the English, but Kai just shook his head without lifting it. But David was persistent, making an indeterminate noise to aid in getting Kai's attention.

Kai finally looked up, released his grip on his legs to free up one hand enough to sign, "*Thank you, but please go. I need to talk to Jon.*" Kai's eyes were pleading.

A long moment passed between them, in which they seemed to be communicating with only their faces. The hurt at being dismissed was clear in David's face, and when Kai continued to plead with him, without words or signs to *go, please go*, David finally closed off his expression, glared at Jon, and left in a huff, the door slamming loudly behind him.

The sound was enough to make Kai jump and descend into trembling so bad he could hardly keep himself upright. Kai's chest expanded and contracted visibly, breathing an obvious effort.

Jon laid a cautious hand on Kai's shin. "Kai. It's OK. Talk to me."

Kai took another ragged breath and lifted his head just enough to peer over his knees at Jon. His eyes were red and tears were tracing down his cheeks. "It was the worst panic attack ever. . . . I . . . I lost myself, Jon," Kai said, biting his lip hard and burying his face again.

Jon frowned deeply, grateful Kai's face was hidden so he couldn't see. He was trying to think of what to say and how when he heard Kai break into full sobs, loud and violent. It was a sound of despair unlike any Jon had ever heard from his brother, and though he'd never admit it, it scared the shit out of him.

Despite Jon's attempts to console him, Kai cried for a long time, until he was

gasping for breath and exhausted, lying listlessly on his side. “I’m fine,” Kai said, entirely unconvincingly. “Thank you for coming to check on me. But you can go back to Vicky.” Kai’s voice broke. “Where you belong.”

Jon was floored. “Kai—”

“It’d be selfish of me to ask you to stay,” Kai said with a pained smile, his breath labored and wheezy from the tears. It could easily have been a jab at Jon, but one look told him Kai was completely serious.

“Kai. I should never have said those things to you. I didn’t mean it. I was upset. And angry.”

Kai’s eyes slid to Jon’s finally. “We’re our most honest when angry,” he said flatly, as if he were quoting someone. He pushed himself back up, seemingly to help his breathing, coughing several times.

Jon handed Kai some tissues, watching his brother cough. With each cough, his breathing got better, though he was still shaking. He was far, far from “fine.” “I talked to Vicky before I came, and she told me to stay with you as long as you need.”

Kai looked up at Jon, his eyes unreadable, but he shook his head. “I need too much; isn’t that my fucking problem?” But Kai’s words held no anger, only pain. Apparently both of them had spent the past few days being mad at the same person—Kai. Jon saw a hitch in his brother’s breathing and wondered if Kai was going to break down again. His suspicions seemed confirmed when Kai jammed the heel of his hand into his eye and spoke, his voice shaking, “I’m such a fucking mess.” Kai pulled his legs to his chest again, hugging them close, silent now, but shaking again, a full body tremor not quite like an MLS attack, his eyes so disturbingly vacant.

Jon took out his phone and searched his contacts. “I’m calling Dr. Miller.”

Dr. Miller’s phone rang until her voicemail picked up, instructing the caller to leave a message and she would return the call promptly, but if it was an emergency, to hang up and call 911. She also gave the number for one of the suicide hotlines.

Jon looked at Kai, sighed heavily, and spoke quickly. “Dr. Miller, this is Dr. Taylor, Kai Fox’s brother. I apologize for bothering you on the holiday, but I would appreciate it if you could call me back ASAP.” Jon rattled off his personal cell number and hung up.

Jon reached out for Kai’s hand, wondering if Kai would pull away from him, relieved when he didn’t. Kai had buried his face again, and Jon realized he was crying quietly, his pulse jumping in his thumb. The shaking, the racing heart—it meant Kai was still ratcheted up.

“You’ll be OK,” Jon soothed. With his other hand, Jon smoothed Kai’s hair, concern and his unfailing parental instinct kicking in and sweeping away any lingering anger. “Let me take you home.”

Kai shook his head without lifting it. When he spoke, his words came out muffled. “I don’t want anyone else to see me like this.” Kai sucked in a harsh breath, squeezed his legs tighter, so tightly he had to be cutting off circulation. “What if . . .” Kai’s voice was strained. “What if Dr. Miller was wrong? I can’t blame drugs this time.” Kai cupped a hand over his neck, as if he were trying to silence his pulse. “I’m losing my mind.”

“You’re not,” Jon said with certainty, though he wasn’t nearly as sure as he tried to convey. “You—” But Jon’s phone buzzed in his hand, cutting him off. “Dr. Miller?”

“Dr. Taylor? Is Kai all right?”

Jon looked at his brother, who was rocking forward and back, though the movement was subtle since he couldn't use his feet to push. He sighed. "Let me see if he's up to telling you himself." Jon held the phone on his shoulder. Nudged Kai's leg. "Kai? Do you want to tell Dr. Miller what happened?"

Kai didn't respond immediately, but finally, he reached a hand up blindly for the phone, holding it loosely to his ear; his other arm continued to embrace his legs tight to his chest. "Thank you for calling back," Kai said in a voice Jon almost didn't recognize as his brother's. There was no way Dr. Miller couldn't hear how upset Kai was. A pause, and then Kai choked out, "The bathroom door closed, and I panicked. It was like . . ." Kai's eyes darted to Jon's, then continued, "I was trapped in a nightmare, but I wasn't sleeping. I . . ." Kai's voice cracked, his breathing growing rapid and irregular. "I believed she was outside the door, that if I held my breath, she'd open it. I thought I was going to die in there, all alone. I passed out."

Jon noticed the "she." And apparently, the bathroom door had been some kind of trigger? Jon still didn't know the root of Kai's PTSD, but he suspected he'd find out more about it within the next few minutes, one way or another.

"No, no, I'm not OK," Kai said in a wobbly voice, his breathing erratic. "I was living my nightmare, Dr. Miller. Sane people don't do that." Kai's desperation was clear.

Kai was silent a long time, apparently listening to Dr. Miller, perhaps explaining what she thought had happened, and calming Kai down.

"OK. . . . OK. . . . Yes. . . . I'm shaking now, and I can't . . . I can't breathe. I can't think. I want to scream and cry and close my eyes and disappear," Kai rambled off, his words falling out of his mouth so rapidly his articulation failed him, his words slightly slurred. "I need to get out of my head." Kai began to break down again. "I'm scared any second I'm going to slip back into that waking nightmare. Oh God," Kai said, becoming more desperate and panicked. He looked like he would either break out in a full anxiety attack or pass out. "I hate this. I hate myself," Kai nearly screamed into the phone. A pause. Kai took in a shuddering breath. "Because I freaked the fuck out in my friend's bathroom and my brother had to come rescue me. Because I feel more out of control than ever. Because I keep straining to hear over the sound of my pounding heart for the sound of a lock clicking, and there's this moment, when I think maybe I'm OK, but then I think, what if I missed it? And the silence is more terrifying than anything else." Kai's voice had spilled out rapidly, almost incoherently, the pitch rising in panic until he was forced to take several strangled breaths, almost like he was drowning.

Kai was really struggling for air now, so Jon laid his free hand on Kai's chest as a gentle, wordless reminder for him to breathe. Kai attempted a few slow breaths, obviously listening carefully to what Dr. Miller was saying on the other line.

"Yes," Kai said, and that single word held more pain than any other Kai had spoken. Jon couldn't begin to imagine what Dr. Miller had asked him. "I don't," Kai said, in that same pained voice, "but I need to, I need to." Kai's voice was desperate, almost pleading, and he'd pulled his hand away from his legs, which were threatening to fall at any moment, digging his nails into his wrist. When Jon saw how Kai was doing so hard enough to leave serious, almost skin-breaking marks, he pulled Kai's hand away, holding it tight.

Kai's eye filled with tears, and he struggled to pull away initially, but didn't fight it long, almost like he didn't have the energy.

"OK. No. Please. No. I can't . . . I can't be alone. And I can't—" Kai's breath became more rapid, panicked. "I can't be locked up. No." Kai closed his eyes, took a few

deep breaths. “Thank you. No, Jon will stay with me. . . . No. . . . You can tell him. . . . OK. Thank you.” Kai was crying again as he offered the phone back to Jon, but he was calmer now, struggling to regulate his breathing.

“Dr. Taylor?”

“Yes.”

“I believe your brother had a flashback, his first, and it’s obviously a frightening experience. He’s in a very rough place right now. He’s given me permission to tell you why he has PTSD so you might understand a bit more what happened today.” Dr. Miller took a breath. “When Kai was a child, he was abused by a woman who fostered him for a summer. In addition to various forms of emotional and physical abuse, she used to lock him in the bathroom, sometimes overnight. One night in particular, he had an asthma attack, and he didn’t have his inhaler. He thought he was going to die.”

“Oh.” Dr. Miller’s words sunk in deeper as Jon glanced at his brother, curled up, crying and trembling on the bed beside him. “Oh,” Jon said again, words failing him. Jon knew Kai never locked himself in the bathroom, but had always assumed it was a hangover from County House. “How old were you?” Jon asked Kai, who was busy tearing the sleeve of his T-shirt, a loud ripping sound disturbing the relative quiet of the room.

“Ten,” Kai said, almost without inflection. His eyes were vacant, though tears still streamed from them. He seemed like the panic had sucked his soul out of his body.

“I suggested a 72-hour hold, but Kai doesn’t want that, and considering his history, I won’t force it at this point. But he really should be supervised,” Dr. Miller said in a warning tone. “Are you able to do that for him? At least for the next forty-eight hours.”

“Yes,” Jon said without hesitation. Vicky couldn’t blame him for taking care of Kai when he was like this.

“Treat him with Valium, as needed, to help with the anxiety and panic, and I’ve agreed to an emergency session tomorrow morning. But the most important thing, as I told you before, is to support him.”

“Of course,” Jon said with a nod. “Thank you.”

“I’ll keep my phone handy; call me again if necessary.”

Kai had waited until he’d gotten his emotions under control enough he could wheel himself out on his own power without embarrassment. He’d apologized to David, promising he’d text him later. He’d also asked David to make his apologies to the remaining guests, since he didn’t have the energy for the thirty-minute-plus goodbyes that Deafie social rules required, which included individual attention to each person, and probably a hug or two.

Before leaving, David had snagged Jon’s arm and pulled him aside, angling his body and signing close to his chest to make sure no one would oversee what he was saying. “*Sometimes, Kai does stupid things when he’s upset.*” David stared hard into Jon’s eyes, as if doing his best to impart more meaning without further signs. “*Please watch him.*”

Jon had only nodded, not sure what else to say. Perhaps David’s hostile stares had been directed at Jon not for the fight so much as for pushing Kai past his limit. Vicky was certainly right: Jon had never shed the truly Catholic trait of carrying guilt, because Jon agreed with David there.

“*Text me if you need help with him,*” David had continued, signing hesitantly.

Then, to Jon's surprise, David added, "*I've hurt him too.*"

Kai had wanted to drive himself home, but Jon had taken his keys while Kai was still in David and Megan's bed, recovering, leaving them with David before they left. Jon wasn't going to risk letting Kai behind the wheel when it was still likely Kai could suffer another flashback and while his emotions were barely contained, hastily stitched up to keep them at bay from the guests, though Jon knew they were liable to rip open at any second.

Still, Kai had insisted he was fine, that Jon could drop him at home and return to Vicky, but even without Dr. Miller's and David's warning, Jon could see Kai hadn't been able to hide the pleading, if guilty, look in his eyes that said the exact opposite of his words: *Please, please don't leave me alone.*

Now they were in Kai's room, Kai transferring to his bed, then just sitting there, hugging himself to try to hide the way he was shaking, again. "I'll be fine," Kai repeated, trying to keep his voice level but not quite succeeding. "You moved out, remember?"

Jon shook his head, offering Kai a bottle of Gatorade. "I was only planning to stay away for the week," he said simply, tapping out several Valiums into his palm. "Give us both a chance to cool off."

"Everyone always leaves me," Kai muttered, abandoning the bottle so he could wrap his arms tighter around his legs. "Why should you be any different?" Kai's words hurt, but one look at his brother told him that again, they weren't meant as a jab. Kai genuinely believed them.

Jon sighed softly and sat next to his brother. "This is my fault, isn't it?"

Kai looked at Jon, surprised. Then he shook his head. "You were right, the other day. I need to take responsibility. People leave me *because* of me. Everything that's happened to me, I've deserved. 'You make your bed, you lie in it,' right?" Kai was parroting back more of Jon's harsh words from their fight a few days before, and Jon never wished he could take words back more than those. Worse, Kai was trying for his disaffected mask, pretending that those words hadn't torn his heart out, but right now, the effort was such it only made him tremble harder, and he looked ready to break again at any second.

"When you were 10, I was 18. If had come for you as soon as I was a legal adult, instead of waiting eight more years like a . . . coward, we might not be sitting here like this right now." He handed Kai the pills.

Kai nodded, almost a reflex, though, and hurriedly stuffed the pills in his mouth, washing them down with some of the sports drink.

"Tell me what you need," Jon said simply. "Don't be ashamed. All of this can stay between us."

A look of profound relief swept over Kai's face. "I . . ." Despite Jon's invitation that Kai could say anything without judgment, Kai still seemed to hesitate, sitting on his hands as if they didn't belong to him and it was his only way to control them. His eyes scanned the room frantically. Kai started to tremble so hard Jon could feel it through the mattress.

A creak—probably someone walking in the apartment above them—sounded suddenly.

"The door is closing!" Kai gasped in panic, reaching for his chair to transfer, but in his panicked hurry—and because of the shaking—the wheelchair moved and Kai misjudged and fell. But before Jon could react, Kai was dragging himself across the floor, pulling himself backward with his arms. It was the fastest Jon had ever seen Kai

move without his chair outside of the water. A quick glance at the door showed it in the same position it had been in, as far as Jon could tell.

Kai didn't stop until he'd covered the short distance and braced himself in the doorway, breathing hard from exertion and panic, still trembling subtly, his eyes closed, tears visible on his cheeks.

Fuck. "Kai, come back to bed. The door won't close. I won't let it."

Kai shook his head, pulled his legs up into a tuck, and wrapped his arms around himself again, shivering violently as if he were cold.

Realizing Jon wasn't going to be able to coax Kai to move as he was, he wandered the room, his mind working. Finally, he pulled Kai's psychology textbook off the shelf—he'd dropped the class this semester but planned to take it in the spring with the same professor, so he'd kept his book. It was a typical college textbook, hardcover and heavy. Jon tucked it under one arm, then disappeared into Kai's bathroom, searching in the bottom of the linen cabinet until he found what he wanted before reemerging. Kai was shaking less now, though he had a death grip on his legs, watching Jon warily.

When Jon grew within a few feet of him, Kai saw the book and immediately buried his head in his legs, covering his head with one arm, beginning to tremble in earnest again. "I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry," Kai pleaded, the words blurring together.

Jon's brows furrowed in worry. How bad had things been for Kai when he was a kid that he was reduced to this? Jon spoke softly. "I'm going to use the book to prop the door open," Jon explained, carefully walking around his brother to the other side of the door. "And then I'll tape the jam so even if the door were to close, it can't catch." Jon noticed Kai peek out through his arms, so he showed him the medical tape he'd snatched from Kai's bathroom, leftover from his post-transplant care.

Jon quickly secured the door as he'd explained he would, then reached out for Kai.

"No! Please! No!" Kai screamed, frantic now, shoving Jon away from him, then trying to back up farther, but he was in the doorway and had no where to go. His chest rose and fell in rapid, panicked breaths.

Jon was saved from falling on his ass by the other side of the doorway. It hurt like a motherfucker, but the Valium had evidently begun to take effect, Kai's posture and muscle tension slackening, stealing some of his strength. "Kai. It's Jon. I'm not going to hurt you." But whenever Jon got within a foot of Kai, he'd lash out, his eyes wide with terror, his chest heaving, so Jon sunk down into a crouch a few feet away, holding his hands up. "You're safe," Jon tried to tell Kai, but it was clear his words weren't being heard.

Kai was mumbling, crying, rocking his torso, whacking his head against the doorway, and it scared the fuck out of Jon, who kept an eye on his brother while he slowly pulled out his phone, not wanting to move too quickly.

"Dr. Miller, thank God," Jon said when she answered after only a few rings.

Kai had sunk down to the floor, weak from the Valium, but still hyper vigilant, hyperventilating, sweating profusely, his eyes wide in panic. Any minor thunk or whoosh of the plumbing, any change in the heat or the hum of the refrigerator made him startle, breathe quicker and shallower.

"Kai's lost it," Jon said for lack of a better term.

He heard Dr. Miller's sigh. "What happened?"

“He thought the door was closing, and threw himself at it, and he was just . . . gone. Like in the hospital, like he’s not *here*. He thinks I’m going to hurt him and keeps attacking me whenever I get too close.”

Kai was still except for the excessive movement of his chest, an occasional slow tremble, and the fingers of one hand repeatedly picking at the skin of his opposite arm and wrist.

“He’s probably stuck in another major dissociative flashback. You gave him the Valium?”

“Ten milligrams. He should be unconscious.” While Jon waited for Dr. Miller to respond, he crept closer. “Kai, you’re OK,” he tried, but when Kai’s eyes met his, the terror increased a hundredfold, and he pushed against the floor, trying to increase the distance between them, but thanks to all the muscle relaxant, he had no strength. Instead, he clenched his eyes shut and began breathing even faster and shallower.

“Do you think you can get him to take more?”

Jon pushed himself to his feet. “No. Well, maybe, since the Valium’s weakened him, I could shove it down his throat, but . . .” Jon paced in a tight circle, his eyes never leaving Kai. “Wait. Dr. Gates gave Kai some injectable diazepam after his last major MLS flare-up. He might still have some.”

Jon dashed into Kai’s bathroom, doing his best to be quick so Kai wouldn’t be out of his sight long, and thankfully found what he was looking for. “Found it,” Jon said into the phone. He filled a syringe, snagged an alcohol swab packet, and dashed back out. “Hold on,” Jon told Dr. Miller. “I’m going to need both hands for this.”

Jon frowned when he saw Kai had managed to scratch the skin off his left wrist in places, approaching cautiously. “Kai, I’m going to give you a shot that’ll make you feel better, OK?” Jon spoke soothingly, though he wasn’t sure if Kai even heard him.

Kai didn’t respond, and though he flinched when Jon shoved his clothes out of the way to expose his hip, he clearly didn’t have the strength to fight him, to Jon’s relief. He swabbed Kai’s skin, then injected the medicine into the muscle. He reached out to try to pull Kai’s hands apart, to stop him from hurting himself, but it was no use. Kai dug his nails into Jon’s wrist in warning and then went right back to pinching his skin.

Jon sighed, snatching his phone from where he’d left it. “Now we wait.”

“That should knock him out. What’s he doing right now? He’s quiet.”

Jon explained, including how he’d tried to stop Kai and gotten his own wrist scratched up in the process.

Dr. Miller sighed gravely. “I didn’t want to do this, but perhaps we should reconsider hospitalization. Normally, I’d need Kai’s consent unless he’d attempted suicide, but since you’re his proxy, if we determine he’s not mentally fit, you could—”

“You’re talking locking him up in the psych ward, potentially restraining him?”

Jon noticed Kai’s eyelids were growing heavy, and his picking had weakened in intensity. The extra drug was beginning to hit his system.

“If he’s a danger to himself and others, yes. We could use IV sedation, perhaps start him on some other medications. Get him through this crisis.”

Jon crept closer, knelt beside Kai, who had finally slipped into unconsciousness, his chest barely rising and falling with each breath. Jon couldn’t resist smoothing his brother’s hair. “He’ll see that as a betrayal. Like I abandoned him again,” Jon said, switching the phone to the crook of his shoulder so he could examine Kai’s wrists. They were red, and a little bloody, but Kai hadn’t actually caused much real damage, the skin barely broken. “We got into a fight Tuesday afternoon, and I said a lot

of hurtful things I didn't really mean," Jon confessed, rising and going to the kitchen to dispose of the used syringe in the sharps container. "I accused him of being selfish, I threatened to move out, and cancel the proxyship so he could have his independence."

"I see," Dr. Miller said after a long pause. "I suppose you can keep an eye on him for now, and I'll keep my phone handy if necessary."

"Thanks," Jon said, his voice defeated.

Kai woke slowly. His body felt strangely heavy, weighed down, unnaturally loose, like parts of him did sometimes after an MLS attack when his muscles would go hypotonic and refuse to contract. He didn't try to open his eyes, but the room felt strangely cold and bright, even through his shut lids. Vaguely, he knew he was breathing, but it was like his chest barely moved, each breath shallow and almost nonexistent.

Kai tried to move, but his body resisted. He felt himself panic. Or, rather, the rush of panic raced through his thoughts, but his body didn't respond. His breathing didn't change. His heart—he could still feel that—continued its slow drumbeat in his chest, though even that didn't feel quite right. And Kai had definitely—in his head at least—sprung up, hands pushing his torso away from the bed, but he hadn't moved. It was kind of like when his legs refused to listen to him. No matter how much he focused on moving his left foot, for example, his muscles refused to so much as twitch in response to his command, and it had been that way so long he never even thought about it anymore. Moving that foot with other parts of his body, or dragging it felt more natural.

Kai focused on his heart. It was fuzzy, like the rest of him. And he really was cold. Was he dead? Was this what death was? Being trapped in your body until, what, you were buried or it decayed and then you were free? Or maybe he just had to separate himself from it. Maybe that's why he felt so heavy. But how did he do that?

Perhaps he was in the morgue. That could explain the cold and the brightness. Had they gutted him yet? Kai had donated his organs—but not his full body—to science, since it was highly unlikely any would be viable for transplant; he'd made the decision nearly two years ago now, figuring maybe people like Jon could learn something from his fucked up remnants. Would it hurt, when they cut into him? Would he feel hollow without his insides? Could ghosts even feel pain—or anything, really? Because if he were dead, that did make him a ghost, right?

He definitely wasn't in a hospital, because the room was too quiet. He could hear the blowing of a fan, or perhaps the climate control system, and distantly, some plumbing, water moving through pipes. But otherwise, he was alone. No beeping. No breathing. No shuffling feet or whispers. Nothing.

He wondered what Jon would do with Kai's body. For months before his transplant, Jon had tried to get Kai to tell him his wishes—it's how the "donate the organs" thing had come up and been arranged, paperwork signed while Kai was still cognizant enough to do so. But more than that, Kai had told Jon he didn't care. Maybe if he'd realized his soul or whatever the hell it was that made us human would hang around after death, he would have insisted on a very specific send off.

Even days before his transplant, when Kai could barely communicate anymore, and it was all but certain that Kai would be dead within a few days, weeks, at most, Jon had tried to get Kai to impart his wishes. Finally, Kai had managed to scrawl on a sheet of paper, *Fun 4 live - wht u wnt fne*. It had taken him several attempts to write this, needing to rest between each couple words, but he'd been able to confirm when Jon at

last got the message: *Funerals are for the living. Whatever you want to do is fine with me.*

But now, Kai knew one thing was certain: he didn't want to be buried. Maybe if his body would burn he would cease to exist, and he couldn't stand the thought of being in a dark, locked box six feet under. Forever. Or for however long *this* would last. Kai had always believed in reincarnation after death—one of the luxuries of growing up in a home had meant he could form his own beliefs about life and death and God. But maybe everyone had been wrong. Even the atheists hadn't gotten it quite right. When you died, you didn't cease to exist, but rather, horrifyingly, you continued. It just wasn't right.

That panic started to form again, not quite expressing itself in his body the way it normally would have, and the instinct to try to speak—since his limbs wouldn't allow for signing—burst through. Perhaps it would only be like it was when he was a kid, before his vocal chords and lungs and tongue and mouth would align in the correct way to produce sound, but he had to try.

Don't bury me, he thought.

"Kai?" A voice. Nearby. Jon? Maybe this was a wake? Kai laughed in his head at the thought.

"Don't bury me." Kai tried again, and this time, the words took form. Sort of. It sounded more like "Dohn beary."

Jon's hand was on Kai's forehead, smoothing it, before he peeled one of Kai's eyes open and shown a light into it. It was so, so painfully bright, but for a fraction of a second, Kai got a view of his bedroom. Wait. What?

"Jesus. I was worried," John said after a few minutes, "that you'd OD'd."

What? And for a moment, Kai was sure his eyebrows had dipped that time, though he kept his eyes firmly closed. He felt his brother's hands slipping something on his finger, probably a pulse oximeter, then a cuff on his arm. It tightened, painfully, so that meant he was still alive, right? Wait. Kai was confused. He felt the cuff slowly deflate, till it finally released completely with a hiss and Jon removed it.

Kai risked opening his eyes, just a slit.

"I only left you alone for a minute. To check my blood sugar." Jon was gripping one of Kai's hands painfully tight. "When I came back, it looked like you weren't breathing, and you wouldn't wake up."

Drugs. But he was home. Had he taken too many Valium to help him sleep? But then Kai remembered panic, though the rest was hazy. "Kill myself I try?" The drugs also apparently eliminated the censor in his head that would've kept that just a thought.

Jon let out a long, whooshing sigh. "No. God, no. It's my fault. The Valium didn't seem to be working, and you were so terrified. Dr. Miller thought a few more milligrams would knock you out. Thought maybe your tolerance was high. But it was more than you've ever taken outside the hospital. I'm sorry." Jon smoothed some hair out of Kai's face. "How are you feeling?"

"Dead," Kai said before he could stop himself. And sick, like he was going to throw up, though he didn't have the energy for it.

Jon may have frowned, but Kai wasn't sure. He'd let his eyes close again. "How's your breathing? Should we go to the hospital?"

The image of being strapped to a stretcher and trapped inside a tiny ambulance sent a new rush of panic through Kai's brain, but apparently the drugs were keeping his body in check. Kai managed to shake his head. "Help me sit?"

Kai's body was loose—not quite like it had been in September, when he was on

a cocktail of muscle relaxants, including Mexitil, to try to keep his body from pulling itself apart at the seams, but he couldn't really push himself up, and he was pretty certain that even if he could manage that, he wouldn't be able to hold himself there. Jon seemed to sense this, so he shifted Kai's legs, and then Kai felt the mattress dip, then Jon lifting him up, though being deadweight didn't help, especially since Jon wasn't as strong as he was. But he was able to help a little, and soon Jon had Kai settled awkwardly, leaning against Jon's chest, Jon apparently against the wall, his arms helping to keep Kai upright.

Sitting up helped the nausea and his breathing. Kai was able to open his eyes finally without the light hurting too badly, and he glanced toward the bathroom. Something about it wasn't right, but he couldn't quite figure out what it was. He let his head fall back on his brother's shoulder because keeping it up was too difficult right now.

But Jon apparently had followed Kai's gaze. "I took the bathroom door off its hinges while you were out," Jon explained.

So that was it. The door was gone. Kai wasn't sure where Jon had put it—out in the main room, maybe?

"I thought maybe you wouldn't be terrified of going in there if there wasn't a door."

A rush of grateful relief swept through Kai. "You best brother." Dammit, now Kai remembered one reason he didn't like to take too much Valium. Too much raw honesty.

"Renee called while you were out. I let it go to voicemail."

Kai let his head roll with gravity so that it barely stayed on his brother's shoulder, closing his eyes again. If it weren't for the fact that he said almost every thought that sprang to his mind, he had to admit he felt pretty good right now. He hadn't even realized how much muscle tension he lived with everyday until it was suddenly all blissfully gone. Was this how people became addicted?

"You love Vicky?" Kai asked lazily.

Kai felt his brother's deep breath. "Yes. Yes. I do."

"She love you?"

"Yes. If she didn't, she wouldn't put up with my shit," Jon added with a slight laugh.

"I think I love Re. I think she loves me. But."

"But?"

"But she doesn't know me." Kai was so relaxed and secure right now he could fall asleep again, but at the same time, a gnawing in the back of his brain seemed to whisper, *Don't fall asleep. Keep vigilant.* And then he suddenly remembered the freak out at David's house, the reason he was doped up and telling things to Jon he wouldn't tell anyone, except maybe Dr. Miller, behind closed doors. He felt his heart lurch, like a car trying to turn over in cold weather, like it wanted to race but the drugs were holding it back. "I'm so fucked up."

Perhaps Jon misinterpreted what Kai meant, figuring he was referring to how incredibly stoned he was right now. "I shouldn't have given you so much diazepam. I'm sorry."

Kai laughed, far longer and louder than he should have, and a voice inside of him was screaming, *What the fuck is wrong with you? Shut up!* "I would have slit my wrists if you hadn't." *Fuck*, Kai thought. *I hadn't intended to say that out loud.*

Especially since that wouldn't even be Kai's first choice for suicide.

Kai felt Jon stiffen.

Kai vaguely remembered powerful, irrational panic, embarrassing hysteria, desperation to get outside his head anyway he could. A diazepam shot and the sleep of the dead. *Sleep of the dead. Ha.* That made Kai giggle.

Kai sensed Jon's anger before his brother even moved or spoke. Somehow, faster than Kai's drug-soaked mind could process—Jon shifted their positions so Kai was on his back, Jon looming over him. "Is this funny to you?"

Kai blinked at Jon, struggling to focus his vision. "I think about it sometimes," Kai admitted while his internal voice yelled, *SHUT UP!*

Jon stared down at Kai though he didn't try to pin him, likely assuming Kai couldn't resist right now anyway. A faint feeling of relief washed over him.

Kai laughed, but it wasn't a happy sound. "You'd be better off without me. No one to fuck up your life. You could marry Vicky, or not marry her, guilt free." Kai gave up trying to focus his eyes, so he let them shut. "It would be easy, too," Kai continued in his nonchalant voice. "Valium plus Mexitil. See which stopped first: my breathing or my heart."

"Stop it," Jon said, the words coming out like a hiss.

"If I was dead, the committee couldn't blame me anymore. Martin could get his transplant."

Kai could feel Jon's angry glare through his closed lids. "You don't understand why I was so angry about the committee meeting, do you?" Jon paused, as if waiting for Kai to say something, but when he didn't, Jon continued, "I don't want Martin to die. I don't want any of my patients to die. I still think the committee is a bunch of old-fashioned, stick-in-the-mud, narrow-minded assholes who couldn't see the truth if it was pinned to their nose. But I lost my temper, really lost my temper, because I had to find out from Dr. Johnsen's presentation that you *almost died*, Kai." Jon's voice changed, becoming more honest, sadder, somehow, and he sunk down, as if in defeat. "Do you have any idea how getting a call from the ER—after it was too late—would have destroyed me?"

Kai let this soak into the murk of his brain. He felt powerfully nauseated. He may even have dry heaved, because Jon rolled him onto his side.

"I'm such an asshole," Kai muttered as Jon arranged his limbs in the recovery position. "Worthless. Disgusting." Kai gagged again, and part of him wished he would throw up, because maybe then he'd feel better. "That's why she locked me up, you know." He didn't even really care anymore that his brain was leaking directly out his mouth. That wasn't the only thing leaking, he realized, as tears trailed down his cheeks, catching on the bridge of his nose. "God dammit." It worried Kai, a little, that Jon had said nothing, but then, what was there for Jon to say? "Just give me more drugs and shut me up."

"Is that what happened? That woman . . . she drugged you to keep you quiet?"

Kai found himself laughing again, though he was still crying, and a remote corner of his mind pointed out how strange that was, but like his inability to filter his thoughts, he couldn't suppress his emotions right now, either, apparently. "I was mute. She didn't need to drug me. Just lock me away so she didn't have to look at me, either."

Jon sighed, but it wasn't a frustrated sound. "I don't know what to with you," he said, almost to himself.

"Neither did she." Kai tried to see if he could find the edge of the drug, let it

pull him back to sleep, but apparently enough had worn off to keep him awake. His mind refused to be shut off, and he was reminded of one reason he hated Valium so much: it took a shitload of it to have an effect, and then, unless he kept taking it, it didn't last, leaving him nauseous, groggy, sluggish, and hungover.

Kai felt Jon climb out of bed, and a sinking feeling hit him: his brother had hit his threshold. Everyone had one, and Jon had apparently decided Kai was simply more trouble than he was worth. Kai wondered, distantly, how much longer it would take Renee to figure out the same thing. Kai strained his ears for the sound of disappearing footsteps, braced for the inevitability of doors shutting. Maybe, if he really concentrated, he'd even hear a car driving away.

Instead, he heard Jon moving quietly beside him, felt the pulse oximeter being slipped onto his finger again, the cuff of the automatic blood pressure device being fixed on his arm. Jon wasn't leaving him; he was taking Kai's vitals.

"Jesus, Kai. Your pulse is racing," Jon said after a minute, then softly smoothed Kai's hair.

Kai squinted his eyes open, but couldn't see much since Jon was standing. "I'm still freaking out inside, but the Valium's keeping most of my body in check."

Kai could almost hear his brother's frown. The blood pressure cuff beeped. "You're still feeling the muscle relaxant effects but not the CNS ones," Jon muttered to himself as he removed the cuff. "Dammit."

Kai was so relieved Jon wasn't really giving up on him, he was speechless.

Jon checked his watch. "How's your stomach?"

It was empty, and angry, but he'd felt much worse. "I'll live."

Jon sighed heavily. "If you promise to drink a bottle of Gatorade and eat a sandwich, I'll let you have some more Valium so you can sleep, and we'll call it an early night. Fair?"

"OK," Kai said. "But not here. I . . ." He couldn't even say why, maybe because he'd spent most of the day freaking out in his room, but he just . . . he couldn't see himself being able to sleep here.

"Fine. I don't really want to share that narrow bed with you anyway, the floor is hard and cold . . ."

Kai had a vague memory of passing out in his doorway, like his aunt had been there, trying to drag him into the bathroom, but it felt like a dream. It had to be a dream. But was it? Was that when the shot had happened? His head was muddled. *Dammit.*

"And I'm definitely not leaving you alone." Jon paused. "Will you be OK for like, one minute while I get the food?" Jon's nervousness and uncertainty was palpable.

"Yeah. Just . . . don't take too long." Kai winced. "I won't do anything stupid. If I start panicking, I'll scream." It was only partially a joke, especially since Kai could feel sweat breaking out on his neck despite the fact that he was cold.

Jon sat down on the edge of the bed, and when Kai forced himself to look, he could see Jon's face was serious, concerned. "Except those twelve years we were apart—which I'll never be able to make up for—I've always taken care of you. And I always will, as long as you need me. I won't let anything bad happen to you."

Kai breathed slowly for several seconds. "Dr. M says no one can protect anyone from everything."

Jon laughed, a surprised sound, like he hadn't intended to, finishing it with a gentle sigh. "It's true. God, it's true. But it doesn't mean I can't try." Jon smoothed some of Kai's hair out of his face. "Things will have to change with the baby, but you will

always be my brother, and if you need me, I will be there.”

Kai felt tears prickling in his eyes. Again. *Dammit, dammit, dammit.* “I don’t want to need anyone,” Kai admitted with lingering Valium honesty.

“I know,” Jon sighed. “But—”

“Yeah, everyone needs someone sometimes. I’ve gotten that speech more than once from Dr. M.” Kai wasn’t sure if snippiness was a sign he was more of himself or that he was heading for another breakdown. At this moment, it really could swing either way, and the tears suggested the latter rather than the former. “I’m such a fucking mess,” Kai said, half sobbing now. “I wish I could be like you.”

Jon laughed. “Grass is always greener,” he said. “I’m not as together as I seem, and if it weren’t for Vicky, I never would have survived the past four years. I need someone sometimes, too.”

Kai was surprised by how much that admission made him feel better: Jon always seemed to be so focused. He didn’t get distracted, and though he wasn’t quite as good at modulating his emotions as Kai was (when he wasn’t freaking out, anyway), his brother had a certain calm, comforting nature that Kai had always envied.

“You’ll get through this,” Jon said, squeezing Kai’s hand. And for the first time that day, Kai believed him.

David wasn’t sure what irritated him more. The fact that he was caving in and attempting to steal medical records, putting himself not only in jeopardy of jail time, but also losing Megan’s trust and love, or that Kai had been right. Thanksgiving night had meant a skeleton staff in most of the hospital, and those who were working were primarily temps, newbies, and residents who’d forgotten what sleep was.

It had been ridiculously easy to slip through the busy ER, find a supply closet, and pull on a pair of scrubs. He then carefully double-checked his phone settings to make sure it wouldn’t ring and blow his cover, plugging in a pair of headphones he’d pilfered from Megan. His phone wasn’t capable of playing music, but in his scrub shirt pocket, it would at least give the illusion of one of those digital music player things like Megan wanted when they could afford to spend that kind of money. It was a paper-thin disguise, but hopefully, it’d be enough.

Feeling ridiculous, David stuffed the earbuds in each ear, frowning. They were uncomfortable, making his ears ache. He shook his head, rolled his shoulders. Kai had outlined exactly where he needed to go, and reminded him if he walked with a combination of purpose and bored distraction, no one would notice him.

It worked; a couple female nurses merely paused to check him out. He knew he wasn’t handsome, at least not like Kai (although Kai never seemed to realize how innately good looking he was), but he’d been told more than once he was striking. Largely because of his hair, though he’d covered it with a cap since it was such an intense red it would make it easy for someone to identify him later, if it came down to it.

He was surprised by how easy it was to sneak down into the basement, and the simplicity of the lock on the records room door, which he picked easily. He had expected more security, perhaps keycard locks, but presumably the hospital didn’t care too much about the records for deceased patients, particularly since this room apparently only held records older than ten years.

Thankfully, the room was neat and looked organized, though it was dusty and a little dark. Kai had explained that the room was a disaster the last time he’d snuck down there, a few years before his transplant, and so dusty that he’d barely lasted a few

minutes before coughing and wheezing forced him to abandon his quest.

As David immediately dove into the files, he wondered if the hospital had begun digitizing some of the old records, and in the process had put the hard copies in order. Whatever the reason, it didn't take David long to find the month and year he was looking for, and the files for the Taylors.

He frowned. They were surprisingly thin, as if they only had a single sheet of paper in them. Even if Kai's father had been healthy and never been to the hospital except when brought in after his death, David knew Kai's mother had given birth three times in this hospital. Certainly, at least the records from those stays would be here.

Glancing over his shoulder to make sure he was still alone, he flipped each open and noted that his initial impression was correct. The folders were bare except for each person's death record and postmortem. A wave of irritation flared at the idea that he'd gone through all this trouble—including sneaking out of his house in the middle of the night—for nothing, so he checked a couple of the other patients' files to confirm a potential suspicion.

Unlike the Taylors, all the other files were filled with all kinds of records, from nurses' notes, doctors' orders, and test results. It meant that someone had taken the real files for Bryan and Ann Taylor and left these bare-bones duplicates to prevent suspicion. After all, how many people would really look for the records for people who had been dead sixteen years?

Only two people would be interested, and David was looking on one of their behalf. Which meant Jon had obviously taken his parents' records at some point. But why?

It would have been easy enough for David to go home, to tell Kai the quest had been a bust, but even though Kai had chosen his real brother over him, David felt a certain obligation to Kai, as if maybe being around a bunch of strangers when he'd already been in a precarious mood had pushed him over the edge, which wouldn't have happened if David hadn't insisted Kai come over for Thanksgiving dinner. Kai could be a bit bipolar when it came to people; either he put on his friendly, affable mask that no one would even know was a front, or he became anxious, withdrawn, and barely communicative.

Jon's office had been easy enough to find, tucked away in a corner of the sixth floor with several other pulmonologist's offices. Fortunately, it looked like only the staff doctors had offices here, and with the holiday, they were all off duty, so the hallway was isolated and empty, giving David time to pick the lock—another easy one (this hospital really needed to reconsider its security measures)—and take time to search for the files.

Jon's office was decently sized, large enough for a generous desk, several bookshelves and filing cabinets, and a couch that looked like it got quite a bit of use. David noticed that the furniture was arranged to give Kai enough space to maneuver in it on wheels or crutches, though it wasn't nearly as neat as David would have expected. He hardly knew Jon, and what he did was primarily from the little bit Megan or Kai told him second hand, but he'd pictured Jon as the type of person to be almost pathologically organized. David had imagined Jon's office would look like a label maker exploded, with everything meticulously labeled and color-coded.

Instead, it was more like organized chaos. The bookshelves were overflowing with medical textbooks and journals, with both stacked in every possible free space, swamping the otherwise neatly arranged shelves. Jon's desk was similarly messy, but in a calculated way, with careful piles stacked at angles on top of each other, and his

computer monitor a mess of colored post-its stuck all over, trickling onto the desk surface. It was as if Jon had organized everything at some point, then simply gotten too overwhelmed and managed a compromise by stacking and sorting haphazardly as he went.

David actually found it a little amusing, because Kai was kind of like that, too. On one hand, he was inclined toward neatness (David's tendency to be a slob constantly causing problems between them over the years they shared a room). But on the other, when things got more complicated (like suddenly having an influx of paperwork or books he had to worry about), Kai got stressed easily and found trying to keep things straight too overwhelming, resorting to a confined mess not unlike Jon.

For example, it hadn't surprised David to find that Kai had a regimented, obsessively organized system for his daily medication regimen, but all his accessory drugs—the meds he took symptomatically or only when his MLS flared up badly—were not so much organized as gathered together in little villages of prescription bottles that bloomed up on one surface or another.

Surveying the room, David tried to think where Jon would keep his parents' records. Jon must have known taking those files was wrong, if not illegal, hence the flimsy cover-up, so there was a good chance he'd hidden them. In fact, David realized, Jon might not even have kept them here at all. Still, the most obvious place to look—the filing cabinets—might be as good a hiding place as any, simply because it was such an obvious place to put anything.

A quick survey of the filing cabinets didn't reveal what he was looking for, but it was possible that Jon could have misfiled the records to conceal them. David reached for the top drawer to pull it open, but it wouldn't budge. Locked. And not with a key; this one apparently used a six-digit combination. He frowned. That would be a good place to keep files you didn't want anyone to know you had. Unless they knew or correctly guessed the combination, it would be virtually impossible to pick without destroying the lock or cutting open the drawer with some serious tools. Math had never been David's forte, but he knew the possibilities of a six-digit password with ten possible digits had to be in the millions.

All David could do was try a few possibilities based on the little he knew about Jon and hope for the best. It would be frustrating to have gone through all this trouble and risk for nothing, but since the filing cabinet looked like a particular sturdy fire-proof model, it was unlikely he'd get the drawer open even if he had a crowbar.

Taking a moment to think, David entered the first possible code he could think of: Kai's birthday, day, month, and year, two digits each. He entered the numbers, then pulled on the drawer, surprised when the expected resistance wasn't there and the drawer opened. David wondered if Jon realized how disturbingly predictable he was.

It didn't take long for David to find the files, though they were wedged in the back and not labeled. Bryan's was thin; not much thicker than the fake one in the records room. Apparently, unlike his youngest son, he'd been a healthy man. Ann's, on the other hand, was another story, taking up most of the drawer. It meant one of two things: either Ann had had her own physical ailments, or, considering Kai's rationale for wanting to see her medical records in the first place, she had been majorly mentally ill.

David was tempted to flip through the files for more than mere confirmation that they were all hers, to see what it was that had created such a huge paper trail, but quickly decided against it as he shoved the files into the bag he'd brought with him. They wouldn't all fit; he'd have to carry the rest, but hopefully no one would question why a

guy in scrubs was carrying a bunch of files.

Still, David couldn't get out of his head how lost, how *gone* Kai had looked that afternoon after his fight with his brother, or how clearly terrified and barely together Kai was that afternoon. Whatever Kai was dealing with at the moment, perhaps reading about his mother wouldn't be healthy. David could always pretend he'd never come in search of the records; after all, he'd insisted he wouldn't. Or he could hand them over later, when Kai was feeling more of himself. If there were things in these files that pushed Kai over the ledge, David would never forgive himself.

But on the other hand, what if they helped Kai? David knew nothing about Kai's mother, because Kai had always claimed not to remember her.

As David carefully emerged from Jon's office, making sure the door would lock behind him (unless Jon checked the locked drawer, he'd never know David had been there), he decided he'd give Kai the chance to make his own decision about the records. After all, Kai was an adult.

Besides, David already felt like he'd betrayed Kai once by not making more of an effort to check in on him after aging out. Yeah, life had been tough for David, but it hadn't been easy for Kai, either. And if Jon hadn't come for Kai when he turned 18? David tried desperately not to think about that, knowing how sick Kai had gotten even with a roof over his head and food and medicine.

If Kai found out David had gotten the records and never given them to him. . . . It was a good bet Kai would never forgive David.

And that was not something David was willing to let happen.

Flashback: June 26, 1996

Jon was surprised to find Kai standing outside County House, leaning sideways against the front doors in the meager shade cast by the building, his arms freed from their crutches, which stood beside him, carefully positioned so they wouldn't fall. Kai's eyes were closed, and Jon could see his shoulders and chest working, one hand on an inhaler he apparently wore around his neck. It made Jon frown reflexively, but Kai seemed to have agreed to Jon's offer of a place to stay as a last resort and the promise of a wheelchair of his own and not out of any real desire to rekindle their relationship or make up for more than a decade apart. Kai was an angry, bitter teenager, a stranger, and Jon had to remember his brother wasn't the sweet, innocent kid of Jon's memory, but a man who had probably lived a much harder life than Jon could imagine.

Kai wore a faded black T-shirt and worn jeans with holes so large at the sides of the knees Jon could see the metal of Kai's braces beneath, the obvious culprit for said gashes. The pants and shirt looked a couple sizes too big for Kai's narrow, thin frame. An equally ratty backpack clung to Kai's back, looking suspiciously empty, and when Jon cast his eyes down, he noticed Kai's shoes. They were in about as bad shape as the rest of Kai's outfit, beat-up leather laceups with metal fixed to each heel leading up into Kai's pants, likely attached to his braces. Jon could see the top edge of each showed the outline of Kai's toes, suggesting Kai had outgrown them long enough to deform the leather.

Clothes shopping for Kai would definitely have to be another thing to add to his list. Along with a trip to the orthotist. Kai's feet would become deformed—if they weren't already—if they didn't do something about his shoes soon.

"Good morning," Jon ventured as he drew closer.

Kai opened his eyes, nodded, and adjusted his weight so he wasn't leaning against the wall, tucking the inhaler under his shirt.

"Where's your stuff?" Jon asked reflexively.

Kai blinked at him, and for a moment, Jon wondered if maybe Kai hadn't understood him. Instead, Kai sighed, replied in his odd ASL-grammar English, his pronunciation a little thick and nasally, but clear enough, "I have stuff none. I am lucky. Why? The Warden allow me keep my braces," he hesitated a moment, concentrating, before adding in more correct English, "and a pair of crutches." Evidently, Kai was fluent in English, but it didn't come easily to him.

Jon nodded, not sure what to say to that. He remembered his year in foster care before he'd been adopted, how he'd moved from home to home, sometimes after only a few weeks, leaving with nothing but the clothes on his back and the single photograph he'd managed to hold onto after their parents died. Even though Kai had lived here for twelve years, Jon had to remind himself that Kai hadn't the luxury of personal possessions. Apparently, as insane as it was, the woman who ran the place—Jon remembered her name was Evans—could have kicked Kai out without even his mobility aids. No wonder the prospect of his own wheelchair had made Kai's eyes sparkle.

"All right. Well, Happy birthday," Jon said, but his words lost their punch at the dead look in his brother's eyes. Jon certainly had his work cut out for him, it seemed. Did he really want to work with teenagers? Jon cleared his throat, stretched a hand out to take Kai's crutches for him; apparently, with his braces—which Jon realized Kai

hadn't been wearing the other day since he'd been barefoot—Kai didn't need them. Kai's glare was scathing, and he took them in hand himself.

"Don't need you help me," Kai said firmly.

Jon contained his sigh. Kai apparently wasn't a big fan of being assisted—or prepositions. "All right. Let's get in the car and decide what you want to do first."

Kai had opted for his birthday present first, so Jon had driven to the store across the street from the hospital, giving up on any attempts to make conversation with Kai once their destination had been established.

As they made the short drive—County House was only minutes away from JMH, after all—Jon couldn't help casting the occasional surreptitious glance his brother's way. Kai had his forehead leaned against the window, staring out vacantly at the scenery, silent except for his ragged breathing. Apparently, despite how it pained Jon's ears to hear it, that was normal for Kai.

They finally pulled into the parking lot of the store, which advertised rentals and sales of mobility equipment like walkers and wheelchairs, a poster of a smiling old woman with a walker dominating the front window.

Kai looked uncertain, staring straight ahead now, pulling at the loose strings of his knees.

"This is my birthday present to you, OK?" Jon said, speaking slowly and evenly the way he would to a nervous patient. "It'll be yours. So you can get whatever you want."

Kai turned his head and studied Jon for a moment, his face blank. Jon wasn't certain what was going through his brother's head, but finally, Kai brought a hand to his mouth, drawing his flat hand out and down. Jon remembered that sign. *Thank you*, Kai had said.

Inside, the store featured a few expensive electric scooters, obviously targeting the geriatric demographic, a wall of walkers of various styles and features, and some basic folding wheelchairs, including several lightweight models, again, intended for the elderly population. Toward the back were a few of the bulkier folding models not too dissimilar to the ones used at JMH, looking like clumsy, ancient hulks of metal beside the few smaller, sleeker solid-frame chairs on display.

Kai immediately gravitated toward those, his walk surprisingly good, though he clearly was stronger on his right than his left, relying on that side to help pull his left leg forward with each step. Jon watched Kai for a moment until the salesperson approached Jon, drawing his attention away from his brother.

"Can I help you?"

"Uh, yeah. I'd like to order a lightweight wheelchair for my brother," Jon said, nodding his head toward Kai, who was playing around with one of the floor models, even though it was clearly too small for him, his long legs sticking out.

"Of course. We have a couple basic models, and then a few more that allow more customization. I can pull a few catalogs, too if you want." The salesperson, whose name was Clyde according to his nametag, ducked around the counter and started searching through the shelves.

Jon noticed the crutches hung on the wall near the register, mostly the temporary axillary kind, though they did have a couple pairs of adjustable forearm ones not too dissimilar to the kind Kai had. A sign beside them announced, *We do custom orders!*

Jon pointed. “What does that mean?”

Clyde heaved a stack of catalogs with names like *Colours* and *TiLite* and followed Jon’s finger. “For customers who use Lofstrands regularly, we can measure and order them to size, so they don’t have the noise of pins. Plus the custom ones are sturdier, less likely to break, and last longer. More expensive, of course, but the handgrips and the cuffs can be customized, too. Also, we can get them in different colors, especially in the pediatric sizes.”

Jon nodded, opened his mouth to ask another question when there was a loud crash from the back of the store. Jon turned his head but all he saw was Kai’s akimbo legs and feet and a spinning wheel.

Clyde had gone a little pale and rushed to the back, so Jon joined him.

Kai had apparently tipped over, dumped partially out of the wheelchair, perhaps not used to the lighter, more nimble chair, or perhaps because his center of gravity was off due to the chair not fitting him properly. Whatever had happened, he was struggling to get back up, fighting with the lock on one of his knees and the chair itself, which kept wanting to tip every time he tried to get back into it.

By now, Jon had learned to keep his distance, but the salesperson didn’t know any better, and swooped in. “This model is a little tippy,” he said to Kai, locking the wheels. “Makes it easier to maneuver, but it’s not for everyone, and it takes some adjustment.” Clyde held the chair steady, which enabled Kai to finally transfer back into it from the floor. “Is this your first wheelchair?”

Jon noticed Kai acted like he didn’t even hear Clyde, and Jon wasn’t sure if Kai was angry or embarrassed by the spill, or that Clyde had helped him, or what. Kai pushed to the other floor model lightweight chairs, testing the “tippiness” of all of them, continuing to ignore Clyde, who was regaling the features of each.

Clyde looked confused and began talking to Jon instead, occasionally glancing at Kai as if to include him, though Kai was engaged in trying each model out, transferring in and out of them before finally taking off around the store in the third one.

“CP?” Clyde asked once it was just the two of them, casually observing Kai wheeling around the store. This model fit him a little better, though he still looked even more gangly in it than usual.

Jon hesitated in replying. Clyde was likely asking so he could better recommend options for them, but MLS was a very rare disease; even if Clyde had spent years working in the business, he might not be familiar with it. “He has a form of muscular dystrophy with CP-like features, including occasional high muscle tone and spasms. He’s never had a wheelchair of his own before. But he’d like one, for around the house or when he’s tired.” In the back of his mind, Jon wondered if Kai would be annoyed with Jon for speaking for him like this, but Kai had had plenty of opportunity to talk to Clyde himself and hadn’t seemed particularly interested.

Clyde nodded. “How old is he?”

“Eighteen.”

Clyde gestured for Jon to follow him back to the counter, where he flipped through one of the catalogs. “Means he’s probably still growing.” He flipped some more. “Do you know what features are most important to him? Weight, maneuverability, customization. . . ? Do you have a budget?”

Jon sighed. He normally considered himself a very patient man, but Kai’s juvenile behavior was testing his limits. “Kai,” Jon called several times. Kai ignored him,

testing out the turning radius of the current model he was in and grinning, then growling and shaking his fingers when he'd accidentally catch them between the spokes or the rim. Jon stomped his foot in frustration, and that finally made Kai look up. Jon rolled his eyes, waved Kai over.

Kai wove his way toward Jon, occasionally hitting a display with his knees or wheels. When he reached Jon, he pointed to the chair he was in and then lifted his hands, palm up, pulling them towards himself. Jon knew he recognized the sign, but it didn't hit him till Kai grew more frustrated and repeated it again. Was Kai shy about talking to people he didn't know? But then, Jon was basically a stranger, and Kai had spoken to him. Usually with bitter reluctance, but still.

"You want that one?"

Kai nodded.

By now, Clyde was pretty sure Kai was either deaf or dumb in the archaic sense of the word, and had decided to direct 100% of his attention to Jon. "That's the brand I was going to recommend—if it's in your budget, XCalibre—but I was going to suggest a different model. We don't have a floor model, but it'll have a similar feel as that one." Clyde pointed to a page in one of the catalogs. "The Ranger. It's a good first wheelchair. Light, nimble, and adjustable, so as he gets more familiar with it he can tweak it a bit, and it'll give him some room to grow. Plus, you can go anti-tip with it." Clyde indicated the anti-tip accessory.

Jon showed Kai the catalog. "What do you think?"

Kai yanked it out of Jon's hand, laying it in his lap, studying the picture of the chair and accessories. Kai's fingers slid over the glossy paper. He frowned, then pointed to the one he was still sitting in, then pulled out from his chest with his middle finger and thumb. Another sign Jon remembered. After Kai had repeated it insistently a few times, it clicked. Kai had said, "*I like this one.*"

Jon sighed, looked back at Clyde. "What's the difference between this one and the one he's in now?"

"That's the Elite. I recommend that for more experienced wheelchair users. Plus, the Ranger is a lot cheaper, because it's less customizable. But if he's new to this, he won't really know what he wants yet. I'd go with the Ranger, and in a few years, he can upgrade if he wants."

Kai seemed to be engrossed in the catalog, but he looked up at Jon and signed what Jon was pretty sure was *OK* followed by rubbing his fist on his chest in apology. Then he pointed to the catalog, his fist going rapidly through letters too fast for Jon to distinguish, then held his hand over his mouth, wiggling his fingers, his eyebrows furrowed.

Jon had no idea what that meant, and he desperately wanted to ask Kai to just speak English, but it was Kai's birthday, a major shift was happening in his life, and as silly as it was, Jon just wanted to make Kai happy, to see his brother smile.

Kai sighed as he seemed to remember Jon's lack of ASL proficiency, closing the catalog. He took a breath and spoke slowly, focusing on his articulation and grammar. "Ranger is good. What colors?"

Clyde blinked; apparently he'd figured Kai didn't speak. He reached under the counter for a ring of paint chips. "The Ranger doesn't come in too many color options, but you can pick from these," he indicated the first six.

Kai pushed closer, snagging the ring and studying each one carefully before finally selecting a blue not dark enough to be navy but not light enough to be cobalt. A

dark royal blue, perhaps. “No no tip,” Kai said. “I will learn.” Then he used the counter to pull himself back to standing again. Now that he was on his feet, so close to Jon, it made Jon realize more than ever this wasn’t the little kindergartener he’d been separated from all those years ago. Kai was only a few inches shorter, with years still left to grow.

“OK, we’ll get you measured. These don’t take too long, so hopefully it’ll come in within the month,” Clyde said with a smile, perhaps relieved Kai was finally cooperating.

“Happy birthday,” Jon said, patting Kai on the back.

Kai looked at him, and for a second Jon worried Kai would cast one of his soul-melting glares Jon’s way, but instead, he flashed his own hint of a smile.

An hour or so later, they were back in Jon’s car. Kai’s chair had been ordered, along with a pair of new crutches—at Jon’s insistence—and Kai’s mood had lightened.

“You know, you were really rude to that salesperson,” Jon said as he gave the car’s AC a chance to kick in. As cold and miserable as winter could be, Jon had forgotten how hot and, well, miserable, the summers in Jonesville were, too.

Kai looked at Jon, blinked, evidently confused. “I don’t like English.”

“Well, it’s what we have to work with, and I know you’re capable of speaking it well. It’s rude to ignore someone when they’re talking to you.”

“Is this your price?”

Jon’s eyebrows dipped. Was Kai mistranslating from ASL into English?

“For the chair, for a place to stay. You get to lecture me.” Kai’s voice was flat, as was his expression, making it impossible to tell whether he was angry, being sassy, or serious.

Jon sighed. “I was just making you aware of the situation. Accepting help from someone isn’t a bad thing.”

“I accepted your help,” Kai said with a few blinks, continuing his monotone and expressionless countenance.

Jon shook his head. He still loved his brother, even if he no longer knew him, and he didn’t regret having a second chance with him. He just never imagined Kai would have changed so much. Jon didn’t feel like he’d changed so significantly in the past twelve years. But then it hit Jon: presumably, Kai had continued to attend the Jonesville School for the Deaf while they were separated, and Jon remembered some of what he’d learned in the classes for friends and family they’d taken when Kai had first enrolled in the preschool program. Deafness wasn’t a disability, it was a culture, with its own norms and rules apart from the hearing world. The teacher had explained many Deaf people resented hearing people for not appreciating this, for being forced to learn another language when the hearing world didn’t care about the language of the Deaf—ASL.

“You hate hearing people, don’t you,” Jon said suddenly, as it hit him. It wasn’t a question.

“I am hearing,” Kai said, with the first hint of emotion in his voice: disgust.

“You are,” Jon said. “But you’re culturally Deaf, aren’t you. Even if you were forced to learn to speak English, you resent it, and you’re angry at the world for it.”

Kai breathed in and out several times before finally replying, “Being forced to speak is only a fraction of why I am angry at the world.” Kai spoke in perfect English, too perfect to sound natural. “Thank you for the wheelchair, etc. I am grateful. But I will not change. I can’t promise to not be angry. I can’t promise we will ever be friends.”

Jon nodded and finally pulled out of the parking lot. “You can’t promise to forgive me. I get it.”

Jon parked in front of the Jonesville Diner. His blood sugar was low, so he’d decided to make a pit stop before they went shopping for clothes and maybe dropped by Kai’s orthotist to order him some new shoes.

“Are you sure this is what you want? We really can go anywhere.”

Kai seemed constantly surprised that Jon was doing all this for him, that he cared what Kai wanted, and he kept asking, albeit in different ways, what Jon expected in return, what his “price” was. “David said the waitresses were pretty here,” Kai said, struggling with the word “waitresses” and not explaining who David was. A friend? “I like sweets,” Kai said.

If Jon got a nickel for every time he stifled a sigh with Kai since picking him up earlier that morning. . . . “You always did. But you’ll need to eat something of substance, too. Even on your birthday, you can’t just eat dessert.” That made Jon smile despite himself. As a child, Jon had often fought to get Kai to eat more than a couple bites of meat or vegetables, but put anything sweet in front of him, and he’d devoured it.

Kai looked at Jon for a moment, his expression strange and unreadable before finally nodding.

The diner was busy, even though it was early for lunch and late for breakfast, the smell of grease and burnt coffee permeating the air. Jon noticed Kai seemed quieter than usual—if that were possible, his eyes darting around the room nervously. Still, he held his shoulders and head up, doing his best to consciously hide his anxiety.

As Jon scanned the room, he observed Kai’s friend had been right; with the exception of an older woman who looked like a manager despite her uniform, all the waitresses were young and fairly attractive.

One of the women led them to a table and took their drinks; Jon ordered coffee and Kai opted for milk, pointing to it on the back of the menu instead of speaking.

“So, you can order whatever you want,” Jon said, watching how Kai’s fingers fiddled with the plastic edges of the large menu, as if he were trying to peel the layers apart.

Kai shrugged. “Not hungry.”

Jon couldn’t stifle his sigh this time. He remembered being eighteen. He may not have weighed much more than Kai, but it didn’t mean he wasn’t constantly ravenous. Even if Kai had eaten something before Jon picked him up, that would have been hours ago.

“What about if I order you something, and then, after, you can get any dessert you want.”

Kai shrugged and closed his menu, dragging his fingernails over the laminate, staring at the backing. Was he mad because Jon had called him out for his behavior at the mobility store? Or was Kai always like this now? Withdrawn and sad. Jon remembered Vicky saying she’d never seen him smile.

The waitress returned, and Jon hastily ordered himself a chef salad and Kai the Jonesville burger—a bacon cheeseburger with fries. What eighteen-year-old boy didn’t like that? The waitress smiled at them both before disappearing, and Jon noticed Kai’s eyes had drifted toward one of the other servers, a tall, thin girl not much older than Kai with medium-brown curls piled high on her head and a smile that could ensnare any man.

Kai knew she wasn't smiling at him, but he was good at pretending. She was beautiful, one of the most beautiful women he'd ever seen, and he wondered what her hair would look like loose. How long was it? It was impossible to tell the way she had it pulled up. He hoped it was long. He'd had a thing for curly hair ever since his (unrequited) middle school crush on Erika Wasserman.

Kai knew his brother was watching him, but he pretended not to notice. It seemed Jon alternated between several roles. The first, and most familiar, was speaking slowly and patronizingly, as if Kai wasn't capable of understanding him otherwise. The second, and another Kai was used to, was treating Kai like an unusual captured stray animal that had to be carefully observed out of scientific curiosity and uncertainty as to how he would behave next. Lastly, and the role that made Kai most uncomfortable because it was so foreign, was this awkward parental thing Jon slipped into from time to time. Was it because he was older? Because he was a doctor and used to ordering people around? Kai didn't hate authority nearly as badly as David had, but he had no love for being told what to do, especially in English.

Still, despite Kai's best attempts to push Jon, his brother had been remarkably patient and calm the entire time, and other than a few sighs, hadn't yet lost his temper. Kai still couldn't figure out what Jon *wanted* though, and that terrified him, even if he wouldn't let Jon see that. The last twelve years had taught him no one gave anything for nothing; there was always a price: sometimes a steep one. His last venture with a Taylor relative hadn't exactly been all rainbows and kittens, either.

"So, what kind of things do you like to do?" Jon's voice pulled Kai away from his thoughts and the attractive curly-haired waitress.

Kai blinked at Jon, deciding it wouldn't hurt to reply. "Read."

Jon's eyebrows furrowed. Kai realized how much they looked alike; it was a little eerie. If he got to be that old, would he look just like Jon? Well, except for the ridiculous haircut. Kai would never shave his head. "You like to read, but you hate English."

Kai shrugged, searched for something to keep his fingers occupied, finally settling for tying the straw wrapper in increasingly more intricate knots until the paper broke. "Just because I hate to speak doesn't mean I can't like to read," Kai said in proper English, since his more lazy hybrid ASL English apparently annoyed Jon. Normally, Kai wouldn't care, but for some reason, especially after that incredible wheelchair Jon had let him order, Kai figured it was the least he could do.

Jon didn't seem to know what to say to this, drinking his coffee.

Kai drummed his fingers on the tabletop, then pressed his hands into the seat of the chair to adjust his weight. "You're really a doctor. A real doctor?"

Jon rubbed his hand over the top of his head. "As opposed to a fake doctor?"

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-five. I'll be twenty-six in August." Jon looked a little hurt that Kai didn't know this. Honestly, Kai wouldn't even have remembered his own birthday if it weren't for always being sick, and David, who never, ever forgot. Until this year. Kai pushed the thought from his mind.

"Pulmonology," Kai said slowly. He still had trouble with "L's" and "R's" sometimes, especially in longer words and when sandwiched between vowels.

Jon nodded.

Before either brother could say anything else, their waitress returned with their

food. Jon had ordered Kai an enormous hamburger, dripping with cheese and bacon. David would be in heaven. Bacon wasn't something they ever had at County House, but David had managed to blackmail one of the cooks to make some for him from time to time, under The Warden's nose—though as strongly as bacon smelled, Kai wasn't sure how that could be possible.

Kai's aunt had loved bacon, and made Kai cook it for her, which was probably one of the reasons he threw up so much. Some days he was fine, but others, he just couldn't stand the smell of it. Apparently, today was one of those days.

Jon sat, staring at Kai's empty chair for a few seconds, processing. Once their food had arrived, Kai had turned a little pale and then suddenly stood—using the table to help himself to his feet, and done the closest thing to a run he could manage toward the restrooms.

Maybe the bacon cheeseburger wasn't the best ordering decision. Jon debated about following Kai, but the faint headache and lightheadedness told him he really needed to eat, and Kai had made it abundantly clear he could take care of himself. Still, as Jon ate, he kept his eyes focused on the small hallway that lead to the restrooms; if Kai didn't reappear in a timely manner, he'd go check on him anyway.

After about five minutes, Kai emerged, looking a little wobbly even at this distance, a hand on the wall. The pretty curly-haired waitress went over to talk to him, but all Jon could make out was a few nods and head shakes before Kai smiled shyly and slowly returned to their table.

"I'm fine," Kai said immediately. But he sat, staring at his food instead of eating it, sipping his milk and looking pale and tired.

Jon frowned but didn't push him, signaling for the waitress. "Do you like chocolate? You're not allergic, right?"

Kai tilted his head, shook it. "I like it. But I shouldn't eat it."

Jon's eyebrows furrowed at Kai's cryptic response. "What about peanut butter? You're not allergic?"

Kai shook his head.

Deciding not to make any assumptions, Jon asked, "And you like it?"

Kai shrugged.

Stifling yet another sigh, Jon signaled the waitress and ordered Kai a peanut butter milkshake. If Kai wasn't going to eat the burger, or even the fries, perhaps that would be better than nothing.

"Kai, if you're not feeling well, we can go back to the hotel—"

"I'm fine," Kai repeated, offering a smile Jon could tell was not only forced but fake, eating a few of the fries, as if to placate him.

Jon shook his head and went back to his salad. "I thought this would be easy," he muttered to himself.

Kai laughed. He was breaking fries in half, not actually eating them, just playing with his food. "You adopted the wrong puppy if you wanted easy," he said, evidently referencing his licensing joke from the other day.

Their waitress returned with Kai's milkshake, delivered in a tall, old-fashioned glass, topped with whipped cream and a cherry.

Kai's eyes lit up as he brought it closer, eating the cherry first.

Jon sighed, but he smiled. "Happy birthday."

"Oh, is it your birthday?" the waitress squealed.

Kai blushed a brilliant red.

“His eighteenth,” Jon announced.

Their waitress signaled to the others, shouting, “We have a birthday here!” And soon they’d all gathered around.

Kai was mortified, though when the curly-haired waitress joined the group—Becca, her nametag said—he tried to hide it, going for disaffected, leaning back in his chair like this kind of thing happened to him all the time.

The waitresses—and even some of the patrons—joined in the happy birthday song. When they’d finished, Kai was actually smiling.

“Happy birthday,” their waitress said once everyone had filtered back to their stations. “What’s your favorite kind of pie?”

“Everything,” Kai said.

She laughed, a low rolling chuckle. “I’ll surprise you, then,” she said with a wink.

Kai had devoured his milkshake and pie, and even managed to eat a few bites of his burger (without the bacon—Jon made a mental note that Kai apparently didn’t like it). They’d detoured to Kai’s orthotist to order some new shoes, and then they’d headed to the mall. Jon decided to keep things simple: get Kai a few pairs of jeans and some Tshirts and then maybe they could do some apartment hunting.

They walked into JCPenney together, heading toward the men’s department. “Do you know your size?” Jon said, sorting through the stacks of jeans.

Kai shrugged.

Jon looked at him. Kai was a little shorter and thinner than he was, so he supposed he could make a guess. “I’d say, 28 or 29 waist. . . . Does that sound right?”

Kai shrugged. “I would wear whatever would fit my braces. And a belt,” Kai said.

Jon shook his head, snagged a few different sizes for both the waist and leg and dragged Kai to the dressing room.

“Taking my pants off isn’t easy,” Kai said as soon as they hit the room. Kai pointed to his shoes, as if that would explain everything.

Jon took a deep breath. Kai’s shoes were attached to his braces, which meant he couldn’t easily remove them, or his pants, for that matter. Which, after their visit to the orthotist, Jon should have realized. “Fine. You won’t try them on then. Maybe I can see your size at least. Is this weird?”

Kai shrugged.

Jon motioned for Kai to lift his shirt up, and as soon as he did, Jon realized any awkwardness between them would be avoided: Kai’s jeans were at least a size or two too big, barely held up by an equally large belt he’d looped back. The oversized clothes had hidden how horrifyingly gaunt Kai was, his hipbones prominent and the edge of his ribs, peeking beneath his raised shirt, clearly visible. No wonder. Even with dessert, Kai had hardly eaten any lunch, and Jon doubted his appetite had been much better at County House.

“All right, forget it. I’ll just buy a few different sizes and styles and you can see what works for you when we get to the hotel, I guess. Let’s go pick out some shirts and we can get out of here.”

Jon and Kai exited the mall, the acrid odor of cigarette smoke hitting Jon’s nose: a group

of kids about his brother's age were gathered around, smoking and talking. Jon immediately glanced over at Kai, who was holding his breath and doing his best to hurry.

But Jon didn't have a handicapped placard, and hadn't been able to find a parking space close. Kai was trying to act cool, but Jon could see his chest jerking, and soon he was coughing. Jon would have offered to get the car and pick Kai up so he didn't have to walk, but honestly, he didn't want to leave Kai alone and it was probably better not to leave Kai near the smokers anyway.

Kai coughed harder, beginning to wheeze, leaning against one of the parked cars, fishing out his inhaler and taking a few quick puffs. His eyes were shut, and he leaned forward as best he could without losing his balance, his breathing harsh, loud, painful sounding.

Jon hated not being able to do much, so he got close to Kai, offering him his support and his hand. Kai accepted, to Jon's surprise, still working hard for each breath, though the medicine was evidently working. Over the next few minutes, Kai's wheeze lessened, and his breathing slowed, though the attack had clearly taken a lot out of him.

Jon said nothing, just being there for Kai, giving time for the albuterol to continue working, and for Kai to recover. Several more minutes passed, and though Kai was clearly wiped out, he pushed away from the car, releasing Jon's hand, and began to walk—slowly—back to Jon's sedan.

Jon walked silently beside Kai, matching his pace, not wanting Kai to feel rushed, carefully listening and watching for any signs of further distress. Jon was relieved the space on the passenger's side of his vehicle was empty, so he didn't need to back out for Kai to get in. As soon as the doors were unlocked, Kai sunk in gratefully, using the door and its frame to help ease himself into the seat before pulling his legs in one by one. He leaned back, his eyes falling closed, his breathing a little more labored than it had been earlier in the day, but he seemed to be OK.

Jon needed to get Kai a nebulizer, too, he realized, since he didn't have one of his own now that he no longer lived at County House. "Let's get you home so you can rest a while," Jon offered.

Kai didn't open his eyes. "I don't have a home anymore," he said in pieces, his voice low and breathy.

Jon was grateful he'd rented a traditional folding wheelchair for Kai to use until his came in, because Kai had fallen asleep not long after Jon pulled out of the parking lot, and though he roused when Jon shook him, was clearly too exhausted from the long day and the attack—his legs jittering with spasms—to walk. As underweight as Kai was, Jon wasn't strong enough to carry him, either, so he helped Kai transfer. Kai initially tried to push himself, but was too short of breath and had to give up, gasping, after only a few feet. Though he clearly wasn't thrilled by the prospect, he had no choice but to let Jon push him the rest of the way to their room. Concerned for Kai, Jon left everything else in the car, figuring he could get the rest of their purchases later.

Because of his strange situation, transferring programs, Jon had originally opted for a temporary subletting situation, living in a resident's apartment who was away doing a rural rotation for a couple months. With Kai in the picture, though, Jon had switched to a hotel room with an accessible bathroom and two double beds so Kai would be more comfortable. Jon hoped they'd find a two-bedroom apartment that would work for both of them soon, though.

Kai transferred to one of the beds by himself, but he soon lay back, his eyelids heavy.

Jon wasn't sure if he should offer to help Kai undress or not. "Let me know if you need anything," Jon said instead, hoping that was neutral enough.

"I'm sorry," Kai said, his voice breathy.

"It's fine," Jon said, wanting to smooth Kai's hair, but not sure Kai would welcome the touch. "Get some rest. Do . . . you want me to help you take your braces off?"

Kai put one hand, folded, fingers touching his chest near his shoulder, then let it sag. Perhaps the sign for "tired"? Because his arm fell shortly after, and soon he was asleep.

Kai woke slowly. His chest, neck, and back hurt, and he felt tired, like he had been for weeks, ever since he'd started hoarding his meds in preparation for "kicking out" day, but he was breathing easier as he pushed himself into a sitting position. As he did so, he realized at some point, while he was sleeping, Jon had taken off Kai's pants, braces, socks, and shoes, shifting him under the blankets in just his underwear. Kai glanced over, seeing his braces and crutches propped up against the wall on one side of the bed, the rented wheelchair on the other, within easy reach, his jeans folded neatly in the seat. Kai sat for a moment, waking up, processing. It disturbed him, on one level, that Jon had managed to strip him of his pants and braces without Kai waking up. Doing so wasn't a quick or easy task, especially since, presumably, Jon wasn't nearly as familiar with the process as Kai was. Either you had to try to work the jeans off over the bulky braces beneath, then undo the numerous straps before finally freeing his feet from his shoes, or you had to leave the jeans on, working to undo the straps by feel until Kai could shimmy out of the whole mess at once. Both were time consuming, and both were awkward, and Kai wondered, if he hadn't woken throughout that ordeal, what else could he have possibly slept through?

Nervously, Kai slipped a hand under the waistband of his underwear, cupping his package as if to reassure himself it was still there, as silly as the idea was. Even tired and nervous and still unsure as to what Jon wanted with him, the subtle touch had him half hard in seconds. But a few strictly non-sexy thoughts—including Jon with his hands on him in the dressing room only hours earlier—and things took care of themselves.

Jon was awfully hands on, especially for a hearie, and Kai worried if that was perhaps Jon's price. After all, he was buying Kai stuff, and he'd wanted Kai to strip at the mall, and evidently had done exactly that while Kai was asleep. He shivered, staring at the door of the bedroom that led to the rest of the suite. Jon was a doctor, and doctors were generally hands-on by nature, and Jon hadn't really done anything to raise any of Kai's red flags except for the very fact that he hadn't raised any red flags. If Jon was some kind of perv, he'd had plenty of opportunities—in the car, in the dressing room—but Jon had seemingly been nothing but concerned and eager to make Kai happy, as ridiculous as that was. Kai threw the blanket off, grabbed his jeans and used his hands to pull them on each leg. Sleeping in his braces was uncomfortable, and Kai had vague memories of Jon taking care of him when they were young, before their parents died. Maybe Jon had genuinely wanted to help. To make Kai more comfortable. If Jon had meant Kai harm, would he have left his jeans and wheelchair nearby? Or his crutches and braces, for that matter? Would he have bothered to get a hotel room with a bathroom that Kai wouldn't have any trouble using? If Jon really wanted to take

advantage of him, like Aunt Julia had, it would have been easy to bring Kai somewhere relatively inaccessible, to keep his mobility aids out of reach, to try to trap him. . . .

But Jon had ordered Kai a wheelchair all his own. New crutches that would fit him properly and wouldn't perpetually announce his presence with the clang of rattling pins. He'd rented this room, and this wheelchair, Kai thought gratefully as he transferred into it. Kai wouldn't let his guard down yet, but maybe it was possible Jon was just trying to be—as foreign as that was—nice. Maybe . . . things would be OK. Good, even.

Jon was sitting at the desk in the suite, taking notes on apartment complexes for them to check out the following day when Kai finally woke. He rolled out of the bedroom in his rented chair, dressed again, though his feet were bare. Jon had taken a calculated risk once he was certain Kai was sound asleep and removed his pants, braces, and shoes. Kai had been right; it wasn't easy to do, but the too-large pants certainly made the job easier. Jon had been a little surprised Kai didn't wake the entire time, but also a little relieved. Kai needed the rest.

Jon had discovered his oversights in their earlier clothing run once he'd gotten Kai's pants off: Kai apparently had only been allowed to keep two pairs of underwear—the ratty pair of tighty-whites that fit only slightly better than the rest of his clothing—and one extra, folded in his bag, and no socks except the single pair of brace socks he'd been wearing under his orthotics. Kai could probably also use a pair of shoes he could wear that weren't attached to his braces.

“Feeling better?” Jon couldn't gauge Kai's mood, which he was beginning to suspect would be a common experience.

Kai still looked a little tired, but he seemed to be breathing easier, relatively, and his cheeks had more color. He nodded, pushed a little closer. “You took off my braces,” he said, speaking slowly as if he were having to think before each word to make sure his grammar was right.

“I figured you'd be more comfortable.”

Kai stared at Jon for a long time, an uncomfortable, penetrating stare, one Jon had noticed Kai giving him throughout the day, as if he were constantly searching for Jon's hidden motivations.

“I'm sorry if I overstepped,” Jon added in apology.

Kai took in a harsh breath and only nodded; whether that was an indication that Kai didn't mind or what, Jon wasn't sure.

Kai wasn't angry, surprisingly, and Jon would take what he could get. Maybe it was a sign he was making some headway with his brother after all. “You hungry? We can go somewhere, or I can order room service or delivery.”

Kai's head tilted, almost like a bird or dog. “Room service?”

“Yeah, food made here in the hotel and they bring it to your room?”

Kai rolled his eyes. “I grew up sheltered, not under a rock. I know what room service is, even if I've never stayed in a hotel before.”

There was the sass Jon was expecting, but he realized this time that Kai was smiling faintly. Jon reached over for the room service menu and offered it to his brother. “Take a look and see if there's anything there that sounds good. If not, you can call down to the front desk and ask if they have any menus for places that deliver to the hotel.”

Kai laid the menu in his lap and pushed to the couch, transferring easily, though it took him a moment to recover his breath, making Jon frown reflexively.

“I’m sorry about earlier. I was trying to do too much in one day.”

Kai shrugged as he flipped through the binder. At first, Jon didn’t think Kai was going to say anything, but he finally looked up at Jon, his eyes unreadable, but not intentionally so; the emotions there were just too complex for Jon to parse out, especially from across the room. “I was heading toward an attack all day. The cigarette smoke just triggered it sooner rather than later.”

Jon nodded. “I hope you don’t mind, but I talked to Dr. Johnsen while you were asleep and I’m going to pick up a nebulizer and your prescriptions tomorrow. You’ll be OK until then, right?”

Kai nodded. “I have my inhalers and a few of my pills. I’d been hoarding them for a while, since I wasn’t sure how things would go once I turned eighteen,” Kai admitted.

Jon frowned but let Kai’s comment slide, seemingly unnoticed. “I also found a few apartment complexes that sound promising. Made some phone calls. Weren’t too many two-bedrooms with accessible bathrooms, but I found a couple, plus a few more that the landlord said could be modified easily.”

Kai nodded, looked up at Jon for a moment. “I keep expecting to wake up,” he said. Jon noticed Kai had been trying harder, since about midway through the day, to speak properly for Jon’s sake.

“How’s that?”

Kai’s brows furrowed for a minute, perhaps confused by the idiom, before continuing, “None of this feels real.”

Jon could understand on a certain level; he’d felt similarly at first, after their parents died, and later, when he first moved in with his adoptive father. “Do you usually dream about having asthma attacks?”

Jon had meant it as a kind of joke, but Kai responded anyway. “Oh, yeah, all the time.” He abandoned the open binder in his lap a moment, locking his hands and stretching them high above his head, rolling his neck and shoulders. “But I usually wake up gasping, and I’m still here, with you, so either this is a particularly unusual dream. . . . Maybe I’m in a coma? . . . Or it really is real.”

Kai spoke so matter-of-factly, it made Jon’s chest hurt. He should have been there all those years for his brother. How selfish he’d been, focusing on school and his fear of learning that Kai really was dead . . . of wanting a life of his own without needing to worry about anyone else . . . instead of looking for Kai at his first opportunity.

Kai shrugged, returned to examining the menu. “They say you don’t dream when you’re unconscious, especially drugged, but it’s not true. It’s not common, but it’s happened to me before.”

Jon studied Kai, but said nothing. Dr. Johnsen, despite Jon’s pleas, wouldn’t violate Kai’s privacy even for a general survey of what Kai’s health over the past twelve years had been—though Johnsen had only been Kai’s physician for five years or so.

“Meatloaf tonight,” Kai said as he continued to flip through the menu.

“Is that what you want?” Jon checked his watch. It was almost six, and he was going to need to eat something soon. If Kai couldn’t make up his mind, Jon would have to eat a little something out of the vending machine, as much as he hated junk food.

“At County House,” Kai said, looking up. “They love meatloaf because it’s cheap and everyone—even the kids on feeding tubes, if they blend it up enough—can eat it.” Kai gestured a box in the air, then pinched the skin between his thumb and index finger, then fingerspelled something. Then he drew a hand out from his mouth, thumb inward,

jerking down, his face one of disgust. Kai seemed to remember himself, and clarified, “I fucking hate meatloaf.”

Jon rose and crossed the room, taking a seat in one of the chairs near the sofa. Kai’s face twitched at the proximity, but he didn’t say anything, and Jon figured it was as close to an invitation as he’d get. “There has to be a food you like though. Pizza?”

Kai shrugged, shut the menu and tossed it aside, began working his fingers into his neck.

“Hamburger? Fries? Well, we ruled those out already today. Spaghetti? You used to love that when you were little. Well, as much as you loved anything that wasn’t sugary,” Jon conceded.

Kai sighed. “Spaghetti is OK,” he said, saying the word slowly, as if he were worried he’d flub the pronunciation. “But it’s a ‘bad one.’”

Jon’s eyebrows dipped.

“Never mind.”

Jon really wanted to push, but his few hours with his brother had taught him that pushing Kai was like harassing a growling dog. It didn’t make the situation better, and if you were really unlucky, you’d get attacked.

Kai looked at Jon hard for a long while before apparently deciding to explain. “My stomach doesn’t always like to be filled. I couldn’t eat the bacon today. Why? The smell,” Kai said, looking at Jon earnestly, as if hoping that would cover it. “Growing up, I needed to learn foods that didn’t taste bad a second time.” Kai chose his words slowly and carefully, as if he were thinking in ASL and translating as he spoke.

Was Kai suggesting he had chronic nausea and vomiting? He’d always had a sensitive stomach as a child, and he’d never been a big eater, but this was serious. That could certainly help to explain how underweight he was.

“No, I don’t have an eating disorder,” Kai said defensively, as if he thought that was how Jon’s mind was turning. “Food and I just . . . don’t always get along.”

Jon accepted the menu from Kai, glancing through it. “How about a turkey sandwich? Do you think you could manage that? And I’ll get you a slice of cheesecake. I suppose it’s more nutritious than most desserts, and it’s full of calories.”

Kai nodded, and though he feigned more nonchalance, Jon caught the hint of a relieved smile.

Kai wasn’t going to admit it, but so far, Jon seemed pretty awesome, and Kai had begun to relax around him. After all, he’d done nothing but put up with Kai’s shit all day and buy him stuff. Not in a showy, “trying to buy my way into your favor kind of way,” either. That didn’t mean it wasn’t blatant how much Jon wanted to be friends, despite Kai’s warning. The fact that Jon was a doctor had automatically painted him in a certain light; after all, Kai had experienced dozens, if not hundreds of physicians in his life. Most of them were arrogant, didn’t listen, and thought they knew him better than he knew himself. Kai had especially hated the ones who wouldn’t wait for an interpreter, or who wouldn’t use the interpreter properly. Who treated him like a small child instead of someone capable of fully feeling pain and understanding what was going on.

Jon, on the other hand, even though he occasionally slipped into a slightly condescending tone, seemed to genuinely care about Kai, as bewildering as that was. Dinner had been one of those moments, when he hadn’t pushed Kai to explain more, simply decided maybe staying in would be best for both of them and selecting items he thought might work with Kai’s finicky stomach. Kai had forced himself to eat half the

sandwich and most of the cheesecake and had listened attentively as Jon spoke a bit about his life and his plans for the future. Kai had even offered a few of his own questions and answers, but the truth was, as the evening wore on and grew closer to the time for him to take his medicine, his breathing became worse, increasingly difficult to hide from Jon, who was nothing if not perceptive.

Kai leaned forward, he thought, nonchalantly, his hands on his knees, which made breathing a little easier. But he still had to work hard for each breath, a faint wheeze on each exhalation, using every muscle in his upper body.

Without a word, Jon pressed Kai's rescue inhaler into his hand. Kai greedily took several puffs, forcing himself to hold it in to give the medicine a chance to sink down. His breathing was getting worse, more panicked, and he tried to tell himself he just had to wait for the medicine to work, but his body had other ideas.

"It's OK, Kai," Jon said in a soothing voice, smoothing his hand over Kai's back in a way that was both comforting and managed to relieve some of the strain on his overworked muscles. "Breathe. Come on. In. Out. In. Out."

Kai followed Jon's voice like a beacon leading him through the darkness as he slowly felt the medicine beginning to work, opening his bronchi and letting his breathing deepen, the tightness in his chest easing.

"You're OK."

Kai nodded.

Jon smoothed Kai's shoulder before pulling away, as if realizing he was overstepping.

"*FINE*," Kai signed, whether to indicate he didn't mind or he was OK, even he wasn't sure.

"Let's get you in bed."

Kai nodded, but he didn't move immediately. "Thank you," he said, his voice a little hoarse.

Jon shrugged it off, pulling the rented wheelchair closer.

Kai put a hand on Jon's arm to draw his attention. "No. Thank you," he said again, putting more force into his voice. It made him cough, wince; his chest was sore. "For everything." He smiled faintly. "I was wrong, earlier. I want to try to be friends."

November 24, 2000

Kai woke with a pained gasp, his eyes still closed, and his first conscious thought was *hospital*. He felt heavy and disoriented, like he'd been drugged, and his right side hurt, particularly his hip and ass, a low, steady throb that echoed the dull headache, probably a side effect of whatever drugs he was on. His stomach churned angrily, too, supporting the drug hypothesis.

But before he attempted to open his eyes, he listened. Far too quiet. Hospitals were noisy places. The constant beep and hum and hiss of machines. The whispers of doctors and nurses. Phones ringing, PA announcements. Shuffling feet. Rolling carts. Clicking of computer keys. It never ended. Kai's experience with the cacophony of hospitals was one reason he'd developed the ability to fall asleep anywhere, and quickly.

Kai forced his eyes open. Which hurt. He couldn't quite tell if it was from the headache or the light—the room wasn't fully lit, just a lamp off to one side—but it was perhaps enough. Still, Kai was relieved not to find himself in complete darkness, his heart thrumming against his chest wall fast and fluttering. Kai attempted to push himself up, which took a few awkward tries, his upper body swaying slightly, a wave of nausea sweeping over him, and he dry heaved. Vaguely, he wondered if he was dehydrated, and that had saved him from spewing. But he tried not to think about it. The more he did, the more likely he wouldn't get so lucky the second time around.

Kai felt lethargic as he forced his brain to work. Jon was asleep in the bed beside him, stretched out on his stomach, his arms wrapped around a pillow, his face obscured. Wait. Why was he in Jon's bed? Kai tried to bring a hand to his head, to press it against his temple to ease the pulsing ache, but he nearly fell over and had to quickly drop it again. The near-fall made a flare of panic dash up his spine, setting his heart racing faster, which confused him until suddenly it hit him, like the sun piercing through heavy, dark clouds.

He'd fucking lost it. Yesterday. Was that yesterday? The digital clock across the room, with its enormous bright red numbers, displayed the time as just after three AM. Unless Kai had truly blacked out, it meant that less than twelve hours had passed since this all started. Dammit. It felt like ages ago, yet just the edge of the memory made his body begin to respond, his breathing shifting, becoming more frenzied, sweat breaking out on his neck.

He struggled to find something to focus on to stem the impending full panic attack. His bladder. Now that he forced himself beyond confusion and headache and soreness and a racing pulse, he felt the pain of its fullness. When was the last time he'd emptied it? He couldn't remember. It didn't matter. Concentrating on it had successfully stemmed the tide of anxiety, but now he knew he had to take care of it—soon—the urgency increasing with every second. Perhaps that was what had awoken him from the depths of the drug's embrace.

Kai wanted to ignore it, but because of the Gatorade Jon had made him chug, he either had to take care of it or risk wetting the bed and it wasn't even *his* bed. Kai was already pushing the boundaries of brotherly love no matter what Jon said. He didn't really need to add fuel to the fire.

Kai took a few breaths, shifted his weight onto his right hand, and reached blindly over the side of the bed for his chair, but he found only empty space. Panic threatened to grip him again, but he forced himself to think logically. He had to

remember: this wasn't his own room, and Jon had needed to help him in bed last night because of all the benzos in his blood. No matter what he told himself, he still felt that creepy, almost fluttery feeling beneath his skin that sometimes preceded a panic attack as he pushed himself away from the headboard and toward the edge of the bed.

Kai's heart threw itself against his chest like a kidnapping victim pleading for escape when his now-adjusted eyes surveyed his half of the room and didn't see his chair anywhere. Again, he tried to calm his body's urge to freak by telling himself it had to be around somewhere. He'd been out of it last night, and didn't really remember a lot of what happened after dinner yesterday—bits and pieces, like a damaged film reel—but not so much that reality could have warped for real, even if it had seemed that way. Barring serious muscle relaxants, Kai was probably strong enough to lift Jon, but Kai knew the reverse wasn't true. Jon could not have carried Kai, especially as drugged as he'd been, from one room to the other.

His chair *had* to be here.

But then a panicked thought raced through Kai's brain: had Jon kept his chair away from him as insurance that Kai wouldn't do anything stupid if he woke up before his brother? It made the already existing nausea surge. Jon wouldn't do that to him. Jon wouldn't trap him like that.

Would he?

Kai shifted his weight again, not trusting himself to stay upright without support, and jabbed his brother in the shoulder. Jon groaned but only hugged his pillow tighter. Kai vaguely remembered how tired Jon had looked yesterday; maybe he'd taken some drugs himself to help him sleep. Though Jon could be a ridiculously deep sleeper when he did manage to fall asleep, even without meds. Kai losing his fucking marbles probably didn't help Jon's exhaustion. Kai tried shaking his brother a few more times, calling his name, but to no avail.

That floaty, buzzy, anxious feeling hovering inside him battled against his insistent bladder. He needed to go, *soon*. And he needed to focus on that before he seriously lost his shit, which he was far too precariously close to doing than he was willing to admit. Maybe Jon had a bottle in the nightstand drawer. It was a false hope, especially since Kai couldn't imagine Jon *ever* peeing in a bottle. There was a bottle in the drawer, but it was lube. Half empty, something Kai really didn't need to see, but at least all of this was distracting him from the fact that this wasn't the first time in his life he'd found himself desperate and without his mobility aids. He shivered as memories tried to seep through.

He gazed across the room, toward Jon's bathroom. In theory, he could lower himself to the floor, pull himself across the room, but he wasn't at full strength, and there was a good chance he wouldn't have the energy, once he got there, to make the difficult transfer from the floor to the tub or toilet.

The pain in his bladder and the nausea swirling in his gut dragged him back from his thoughts. Enough thinking. He needed to just get down on the floor and figure it out. Maybe Kai's chair was on the other side of the bed, and he just couldn't see it from here. Maybe he'd find a bottle on the kitchen table just outside Jon's room, and he wouldn't need to drag himself all the way to his room.

Kai threw back the covers, then lifted one leg at a time over the edge of the mattress. Jon's bed was high, and even with his long legs, from as far back as he sat on it, his feet just touched the floor. He stared at them for a moment. He wanted to throw up. He wanted to cry. He wanted to scream. His mind was threatening to pull itself into

the past, and he wasn't going to let it happen.

Still, unwilling, a memory flooded his consciousness.

Kai sat on the small bed, needing to pee, bad, but his legs were loose and unresponsive, and she'd taken his crutches and braces again. So he wouldn't get into trouble, she'd said. He had saved a bottle—pulled it out of the trash when she was at work—and hidden it in his room. For times like these. But she couldn't catch him. He reached under the lip of the bed for the bottle, which was partially full—he'd have to try to empty it later, when she was sleeping, dragging himself slowly across the floor—but it'd work for now.

But she caught him, slapped the still-shut bottle out of his hands. "That's disgusting!" she said. "Stand up! I'm tired of your pathetic lazy ass. Stand up!"

Fat tears formed and rolled down Kai's cheeks as he shook his head. "*I can't*," he signed. "*I can't*."

"For fuck's sake. Stop it!" She grabbed him by the upper arms and pulled him unsteadily upright, off the bed. His knees wouldn't lock, and he couldn't get his feet where they should be, not without something to hold onto. Her hands wrapped tightly around his thin biceps, the only thing keeping him from tumbling to the floor.

For a brief moment, he was happy. She was touching him. And not just the occasional slaps when he cried too much or when he forgot himself and signed to her. It was a tight, harsh grip, and as soon as she let go, he'd fall, but right now she was supporting him. It meant maybe he wasn't so bad, so disgusting, that she couldn't touch him except to discipline him. Maybe it meant she'd want to keep him after all, and if he'd just be good, really, really good. . . .

He willed his legs to obey. If he could just stay standing, not fall when she let go, then maybe she'd be proud of him. Maybe she'd even hug him and tell him he was a good boy and he could stay forever.

Focusing hard on his legs and feet and not crying meant he stopped holding his bladder so fiercely, and urine leaked out, wetting the front of his pants and running down onto the floor, making a splattering, wet sound.

"Oh for fuck's sake!"

He bit the inside of his cheek, hard, so he wouldn't cry. She'd never keep him now. He readied himself for her to release him in disgust, for the impact of the fall, but instead of dropping him, she half dragged, half carried him toward the bathroom.

That's when panic set in, and he began to fight her as best as he could, frantically shaking his head and doing his best to get purchase to push away from her body, mouthing *No* repeatedly, frantically, his tongue making a subtle clicking sound against his teeth, the most sound he could produce. He let himself cry, putting his effort into fighting her instead of blocking the tears.

"If you're going to misbehave and pee everywhere like a God-damned dog, then you can stay in the bathroom like one," she said. He fought her, but she was too strong. Too strong. So strong.

He barely had time to think before she threw him into the bathroom. The door already locking before he'd even hit the ground.

Kai hit the floor with a thump that sent jolts of sharp, icy pain through his body, but the pain was good. It kept him focused away from the pull of insanity and any more of that haunting memory.

He adjusted his legs, squeezed the base of his dick. It wasn't too far. He could

do this. He planted his palms on the floor, pushing to shift his body away from the bed, facing himself backwards so he could drag himself toward the open bedroom door. His arms and shoulders burned with heavy fatigue; he didn't have the strength he normally did, and he had to pause several times, leaning against the footboard, but he finally got to the other side of the bed.

Kai pulled himself closer and paused, his muscles trembling, and spied his chair, finally. In the far corner of the other side of the room, draped in shadows. No wonder Kai hadn't seen it. Almost like Jon had been hiding it from him. A rush of hot anger flooded his system, temporarily overwhelming anxiety and pain and exhaustion and everything else. Immediately following the anger were the tears that always seemed too fucking close to the surface lately, and he grit his teeth, taking a few steadying breaths to push them away. He could almost smell another breakdown coming, like it was a component of the air, like the sharp, humid scent before a summer storm.

He had two choices. He could go for his chair, risk exhausting himself getting to it and then not be strong enough to pull himself up into it. *Damn Valium*. Or he could forget it and stick to his original plan.

At least Jon had left the door opened, propped in place with a chair stacked with medical journals. Though he'd left the lights off in the main living space, the darkness threatening to creep into the bedroom like a fog.

Kai didn't want to go out there. It was illogical and fucking nuts, especially since his room was only a few feet away, but it didn't change the way his breath came quicker, shallower, at the mere thought of venturing into it. What if Jon had tidied up and the bottle of Gatorade wasn't on the table after all? What if he aimed for his room, and the lights were all off? Would he be able to reach the switch from the floor?

Kai pulled himself toward the door, making his decision. He needed to pee, so he'd find a bottle, and use it, and then. . . . Then he'd figure out what the fuck to do after that.

Despite his best efforts, the nearly impenetrable darkness of the main room had caused Kai to break into a cold sweat. Rather than risk full panic or worse while he searched for the bottle that should be on the table, he'd dragged himself into the relative safety of his room as quickly as his relaxed and fatigued muscles would carry him, grateful Jon had left the bedside lamp on, casting the room in a soft, warm glow.

Kai took a moment to regain his strength and breath in the middle of the room. He was halfway to an anxiety attack no matter how hard he was struggling to tell himself he was perfectly fine and derail the crazy train in his mind. He tried to force himself to think what would be faster and easier to get to: his backpack, in one corner of the room, or his nightstand. He kept bottles in both.

He just couldn't manage to catch his breath, though, an involuntary shudder coursing through his body. Even the pain in his bladder wasn't enough to pull him away when, somewhere nearby, a door unlocked, swung open loudly, then shut with a bang. Kai jumped, let out a reflexive yelp as his mind immediately began to race.

She's home. She can't catch me like this. Oh God.

Maybe he could get in bed before she got to his room. But he still had to pee. Would he have time to find the bottle he kept hidden under the bed and use it before she barged in? His shirt clung to his back with sweat, his breathing panting, and he knew he should be moving, but he was frozen. Heavy footsteps. Somewhere. Coming closer? Made his stomach seize up. Oh no, he was going to throw up. No, he couldn't throw up,

because that was bad and that made her mad.

A small, warm wet spot formed on the front of his pajama pants before he caught himself and stopped, squeezing the base of his dick with one hand. If he made a mess, she'd lock him up again. Maybe forever.

Kai clenched his eyes tight, took a few breaths, but he just couldn't seem to get enough air. Suddenly, he heard a loud popping sound, and the room went dark. Pitch dark. Kai yelped again, his eyes desperately searching for light, but found only the faintest suggestion of it somewhere beyond his doorway. Just enough that he'd be able to see her when she came in to yell at him.

Kai's entire body was tense and jittery and ready to explode with fear, his eyes fixed on the door. He heard the creak of floorboards as she approached. He needed to move. He needed to move.

He waited, listening carefully. Maybe she'd go straight to bed. He'd be OK. Safe. He could clean the house really well tomorrow while she was at work and then she'd be proud of him. A sharp creak, creak, creak, as heavy, angry footsteps drew closer. Kai was trembling so intensely now he could barely stay sitting. No matter how hard he tried to see in the darkness, it was impenetrable, like a thick blanket covering everything. So dark and cold, like the bathroom.

The thought sent a violent shiver through his body. Warmth flooded over his groin and legs, pooling around him on the floor. Oh God, she was going to be so mad. Tell him how disgusting he was. And wasn't he? Peeing himself like a little kid because he was too afraid to move.

The ear-grating creaking noise of the old solid wood doors in her ancient house seemed to go on forever. Kai had to escape, hide, somewhere.

"You better be fucking sleeping in there!"

The voice made Kai's heart leap into his throat and soon he was bent over, throwing up. He'd hardly finished when he was pulling himself back as fast as he could, away from his mess, from the door, from her. Maybe if he hid she wouldn't see the mess and he could clean it up before she saw it and then she wouldn't send him away. His thoughts were racing fast as his back slammed into the edge of the bed. He could hide under there. For a little while. She wouldn't bother to pull him out, would she?

He could stay with the dirty things under the bed, because he was dirty, and maybe then she'd leave him and he could write her a note saying how sorry he was and how he'd try harder.

Another shudder seized him, his arms shaking so badly he slid down. *Pull yourself under the bed*, he told himself. *You'll be safe there. For a little while.*

Kai rolled himself onto his stomach, hands reaching blindly for something to help pull himself under. Behind him, he heard her footsteps grow closer. He had to hurry! He wrapped one hand around the metal slats of the bedframe, his other hand pushing against the floor, moving as fast as he could in his panic in the darkness. He shifted his grips, pulled and pushed, the metal cutting his fingers, but he didn't care, he didn't care, he didn't care.

Safe.

That's all that mattered.

He moved until one shoulder pressed against the wall, using a hand to guide his stubborn legs under. Kai's vision, even in the darkness, was fading, his breathing panicked to the point of nonexistence, but he kept his eyes trained for the gap between the mattress frame and the floor.

“Fucking more trouble than you’re worth. I’ll have you out of my house in five minutes, even if it is the God-damned middle of the night!”

Even in the darkness, somehow Kai saw her shoes, only inches away from him, and any remaining logic that told him he was hiding, that he needed to be quiet, shut down. He felt her hands wrapping around his ankles, and he wanted to kick her away; he tried to kick her away, but his legs wouldn’t cooperate. She was pulling him out! Kai tried to find something to grip—the legs of the bed—the slats—something, to keep himself safe, but she was strong. So strong. She was going to have him soon, and then what? Oh God. He couldn’t breathe. He couldn’t see in the dark. Oh God. Oh God Oh God.

Kai screamed.

Jon’s eyes shot open, but it took a moment for him to process, his mind strangely fuzzy, whether the scream—pure, undiluted fear—was real, or just the remnant of a dream. He sat up, rubbing his eyes. Kai’s side of the bed was empty, and a quick glance told Jon his chair was still there, too, where Jon must have left it the night before. Jon had helped Kai into bed on his own side, but Kai had wanted to keep Jon between himself and the door, and had shifted over. Exhaustion, aided by the dose of drugs, had meant Jon had fallen asleep without bothering to guide Kai’s chair to put it within Kai’s reach.

The lingering grogginess of the Valium faded as Jon shifted into focus, tearing off the blankets and hopping out of bed. He jogged toward his bathroom, taking a quick peek inside—it was unlikely Kai would have been there, but he decided to be thorough. Empty. Turning back around and surveying his bedroom, it was clear Kai wasn’t here. Had he decided to go back to his own room?

Worry flared in Jon’s gut. What if Kai had tried to hurt himself? What if he *had* hurt himself?

Jon dashed out to the main room, hurriedly slamming his hand against the switch to turn on the lights. He should never have taken the Valium. Even though it had been a ridiculously small amount, especially compared to what Kai was on, it did its job, luring Jon into a deep, dreamless sleep, which he’d desperately needed. But it meant he hadn’t been as vigilant as he should have been. Fuck. If Kai was hurt because Jon was sleeping when he needed him. . . .

Jon scanned the main room—what he could see from the hall—and saw no sign of Kai, so he rushed to Kai’s room. It was dark, but he thought he heard a weak, pained sound, so without bothering to turn on any additional lights, Jon rushed into Kai’s room, relying on the glow spilling in through the opened doorway to guide him. He stepped in something warm and wet, a paralyzing chill gripping his body.

Blood.

Jon’s world spun for a brief moment, but he managed to get himself under control to hobble back to the light switch. Jon blinked to adjust his vision and sighed with relief. Not blood. Urine. And now he could smell it, along with the faint, acidic tinge of vomit. Jon saw that now, too, and the redness of it again made worry flare up, but then the logical part of his brain kicked in—too red for blood. It was the bright, artificial shade of the sports drink he’d made Kai drink the night before. It meant Kai had obviously had another panic attack—a bad one—or perhaps another flashback. Jon had to find him before he hurt himself. But the room was empty, and a quick glance into Kai’s bathroom—which Jon could easily see into with the door removed—didn’t yield his brother, either.

Better to be thorough and clean his feet, Jon thought, hopping into the bathroom, wiping his feet and checking the tub—just in case. No sign of Kai. He snagged some towels, threw them over the puddle on the floor, and headed back out into the main room. Maybe Kai was on the floor near the couch, or in the kitchen?

Jon combed the main room, but Kai was no where to be found. How could a nearly 6'4", 200-pound disabled man just disappear? Without his wheelchair, or even his crutches—they'd been propped against the wall where Kai always kept them when not in use. It didn't help that Kai had grown quiet, and Jon couldn't use sound as a way to help locate him.

It was a long shot, but Jon checked the front door. Kai couldn't reach all the locks from the floor, even as long as his arms were, but panic enabled people to do crazy things. All the locks were shut, including the chain. Even if Kai had managed to unlock the door and open it without Jon hearing, then lock everything again, he couldn't have done the chain. It meant Kai was somewhere in the apartment. But where?

Jon grabbed a roll of paper towels from the kitchen and headed back to Kai's room to finish cleaning while he racked his brain for where else Kai might be. Add disinfectant and it'd smell just like the medicine ward, Jon thought as he dropped down to his knees to paper up the vomit.

That's when he heard it. Sobbing. Quiet, breathy, but nearby. Jon blinked, looked around, but didn't see anything until he stooped to scoop up the dirty paper. The glint of two panicked eyes. Underneath the bed.

Jon blinked. It had to be his imagination; the space between the floor and the frame was a foot, maybe. Jon was skinnier and less muscular than his brother, and he didn't think he'd fit under there.

Jon dropped to his stomach, peering under the mattress. He could just barely see the outline of Kai, also on his stomach, pressed up against the wall, his head tilted, cheek on the ground. He was crying, and as soon as Kai saw Jon, he began to shake, trembling hard enough to rock the bed.

"Kai. It's Jon. Your brother. You're safe. No one is going to hurt you."

But Kai clearly wasn't seeing Jon, crying and mumbling and barely breathing.

Jon pushed away, to his feet, trying to figure out how to either get Kai out from under the bed or snap him out of the flashback, or both. Of course, he could wait until Kai passed out, but he didn't really like that option at all. Especially since Kai was wedged in there pretty good, and it didn't look like Jon would be able to move the bed—because of the way it was braced into a corner—without potentially hurting Kai. Kai was literally sandwiched between the bed and the floor, and it was clearly only sheer panic that had enabled him to even fit into the tight space to begin with.

Jon supposed he could take the bed apart, but he didn't really relish that idea, either, especially if he tried to do that before Kai passed out or snapped out of it. Who knew what Kai's reaction might be if he was still panicked when Jon tried that approach?

Jon found a penlight, left on Kai's nightstand from when Jon was checking his pupils earlier, and got down on his knees one more time to survey the situation. Kai was still trembling, still muttering and crying, but when Jon passed his closest hand, he saw blood. Either Kai had cut himself during his tumble down the rabbit hole, or. . . . The light wasn't very bright, but it was clear Kai was gripping the metal slat of the mattress frame tightly, tightly enough it was cutting into his palm.

Dammit. Jon couldn't leave him there long if he was potentially hurting

himself.

Jon closed his eyes and breathed in and out for several moments, trying to decide what to do. He had too much training to panic, but this was *Kai*, and there was a reason physicians weren't supposed to treat their family members. He opened his eyes and decided to try the first method that came to mind—sign language. Presumably, the woman who had hurt Kai didn't know ASL, so perhaps if he signed to Kai—as awkward as it would be lying on the floor, holding a pen light to try to illuminate his signing—that would snap Kai out of it. Something that was distinctly in the now instead of in whatever horrible memory Kai was still trapped inside.

“*Kai*,” Jon tried, using the name sign of their childhood, a letter K brushed off the tip of his nose, which, amusingly, was strikingly similar to the sign for *pissed off*, Jon had since learned. “*You're safe. No one can hurt you. Come out.*” Signing this way was challenging, and he wasn't even entirely sure if the light was such (despite Jon's best attempts to carefully angle the beam) for Kai to make out what he was saying, but he kept going, signing platitudes and reassurances and hoping it would work.

Jon was about ready to give up and try to figure out a plan B when he saw Kai's grip on the bedframe relax and he let out a shuddering breath. He looked around, as if panicked and confused as to how he ended up wedged under the bed, but then his eyes finally found Jon, as if he truly seeing his brother for the first time. It was hard to see, but Jon thought they filled with tears. Jon fought back the urge to use his voice, just in case, and offered Kai his hand, sliding it under the bed and hoping Kai would accept it.

Kai was reluctant, but he finally released his death grip on the frame and slipped one hand in Jon's, using the other to help push himself away from the wall. Together, they slowly managed to extract Kai from under the bed, Jon doing a lot of pulling, since Kai's position didn't give him much leverage, and it wasn't like he could use his legs to kick away from the wall. The entire time Kai was quiet, though tears still spilled out from the corners of his eyes, tracing paths on his dirty cheeks.

When Kai was completely free, Jon helped him sit up, leaning against the mattress to support his back, trying to survey the damage, but Kai pushed him away.

“Don't touch me,” Kai said miserably. Before Jon could protest, Kai added, “I'm disgusting.” He pulled his knees up to his chest, burying his face in them and sobbing.

Each time Jon tried to touch Kai, to reassure him, Kai would flinch and sob harder. So Jon rose, went to the bathroom to wet a couple washrags and grab some clean towels, being sure to keep Kai at least partially in his sight, and to move quickly. On his way back to his brother, he snagged some clean PJs and underwear from a drawer before sinking down beside him again.

“Let's get you clean, OK?” Jon said in a gentle voice, tugging at Kai's shirt.

Reluctantly, Kai let go of his legs, pushing them down, calm now, though he was clearly still upset and wouldn't let Jon touch him. His clothes, face, and hands were filthy, his shirt soaked in sweat and vomit and coated with dust, his pants and underwear drenched in urine, and he removed them clumsily, mechanically, his tears dried but his eyes so . . . dead. It broke Jon's heart.

“Here, clean yourself,” Jon said, offering Kai the warm, damp cloth. “It's OK.”

“It's not,” Kai said with pained anger, wiping his face and chest and injured left hand (which Jon noted, to his relief, seemed to be superficially hurt—he'd have to treat it properly later, once Kai was asleep). Kai hurriedly slipped on the long-sleeved tee Jon had brought. Shivering, Kai took care cleaning his groin and thighs and drying everything thoroughly before using his hands to help pull a fresh pair of underwear and

pants on. Jon could see how Kai was focusing on his task, biting his lip in a desperate attempt not to break down again. It killed him to see his little brother—who Jon had always admired for being so strong—looking so . . . broken.

Jon plucked a damp cloth from the floor, turned it around to find a clean side and used it to wet Kai's hair, gently brushing out some of the dust that clung to it. He had to make sure to vacuum under there more often. Jon had gotten lax since Kai's transplant, since he didn't have attacks like he used to before, but if he really wasn't cured, maybe he shouldn't push their luck. Kai did sound a little wheezy right now, but it could simply have been from all the tears.

As Jon gently cleaned Kai's hair, grateful his brother didn't pull away or push Jon back, he poured all the comfort he longed to offer his brother, but which Kai wouldn't accept right now, into the touch. Kai kept his eyes shut, trembling subtly, as if he were crying without tears.

"How can you even look at me right now?"

Jon stifled his sigh, debated about saying the words that rose in his mind. "You're unwell, Kai. It might be in your head instead of in your lungs or your legs, but it's no more your fault. It's why we're going to see Dr. Miller, so she can help make you better." Jon tossed the dirty rag aside, gently grabbed the sides of Kai's face to force him to meet his eyes. "You have nothing to be ashamed about, OK?" Jon kissed his forehead. "Do you want to give yourself the diazepam shot, or should I?"

Kai sighed brokenly, but put a hand out for the shot Jon had grabbed with the towels. "I'm worse," Kai said in a small voice, shifting his body and quickly injecting the medicine in his hip. "What if I can't get better?"

Jon took back the syringe, then slipped a hand in Kai's. "You will. You're more stubborn than I am. You've survived when everyone said you wouldn't. More than once." Jon pushed the dirty linens aside so he could sit beside Kai, back supported by the bed. He capped the syringe and set it on the bed for now, holding Kai's hand firmly.

"Have I ever told you about your first year?"

Kai shook his head, pushed himself down to the floor again, grabbing his legs and curling into a ball, his head resting in Jon's lap.

Jon smoothed Kai's shoulder, a slow, repetitive, soothing gesture, happy Kai was allowing the touch. "You were almost two months premature, and the doctors said you weren't going to make it. You weren't breathing on your own, and they didn't expect you to last more than a few days. They even made an exception, since they were certain you were going to die, and let me in with Dad to see you. I wasn't even eight, so I normally wouldn't've been allowed in the NICU, but Dad fought for me." Jon sighed. "You were so, so tiny. We could hardly see you with all the tubes and wires. I talked to you and told you I needed you to get better and if you did, I'd be the best big brother ever." Jon laughed wetly. "You survived the week, so they said you wouldn't make the month. Then three. Then the year. But you kept fighting, Kai, because that's who you are. You've never given up. I've always admired that about you. It's the memory of your tenacity that kept me going all those years we were apart."

"No one can fight forever," Kai said, his words slurred and sleepy, the drug beginning to take effect.

"No," Jon admitted. "But you're not fighting alone."

It had been difficult to rouse Kai at seven for his morning medications, but Jon wasn't entirely sure it was due to all the diazepam. The entire morning, Kai had been

cooperative but distant and silent, as if his mind had shut down at some point during the night and he were just an empty shell. No matter what Jon said or signed to him, Kai barely responded, offering a nod or a shake or a shrug as absolutely necessary, and no more. It had pained Jon to give Kai another large dose of Valium along with the rest of his usual medications, but with so much in his system over the past day, Jon couldn't risk pushing Kai into withdrawals on top of everything else he was already going through. He'd also added a Zofran, something Kai usually took symptomatically now that he wasn't on the Mexitil anymore, as a precaution to help ease any nausea brought on by his anxiety or the large doses of Valium.

After dressing himself in several layers of Tee shirts (both short- and long-sleeved), sweatpants, and an enormously oversized thrift-store hoodie, Kai pushed out toward the rest of the apartment, since Jon had insisted he eat something despite his insistence that he wasn't hungry. Kai had refused a shower, but Jon wasn't sure if it was fear of entering the bathroom or if Kai felt he wasn't deserving of being clean. The slight shiver and dead look in his brother's eyes when Jon had suggested it seemed to suggest a combination of both.

At least Kai had allowed Jon to tend to his injured left hand. None of the cuts were terribly deep, but because several lay in the creases of his fingers and palm, it meant bending or flexing too much risked re-opening the wounds. Not wanting to risk infection, Jon had washed them all thoroughly with an antimicrobial rinse, treating each with antibiotic ointment and bandaging it as well as he could.

Jon had expected Kai to plant himself stubbornly at the kitchen table—it wouldn't have been the first time Jon had “forced” Kai to eat when he didn't want to—but instead, Kai had made it all the way to the kitchen, using his arms on the counters and cabinets to propel himself on his left as necessary to give his hand a break.

Kai snagged the coffee carafe from where Jon had left it drying by the sink, presumably to fill it. Kai never drank coffee, but he did occasionally make it for Jon, though it surprised Jon that Kai was doing it this morning. Maybe he simply needed something to keep himself from being alone with his mind?

“You don't need to worry about that,” Jon said before he could stop himself. “I'll get it.”

Kai turned with shocking abruptness, the carafe halfway to the sink, and it hit the edge of the cabinet and shattered, glass exploding over Kai's lap and the floor around him. “Fuck!” Kai screamed loudly, the sound especially vivid since he'd been completely silent all morning.

“It's fine, Kai,” Jon said, holding up his hands as if to pacify his brother. “Just stay still—”

“I'm not helpless,” Kai said, angry, but with a tinge of desperation. It was a relief to finally see emotion after the morning's vacancy, but that look, that tone, was enough to nearly throw Jon into his own flashback. Jon vividly remembered his mother dropping the carafe—this one filled with coffee—in the middle of the kitchen floor. Trying to pretend she was fine before dissolving into tears, folding down onto the ground, seemingly oblivious that she was kneeling on shards of glass and hot coffee. At the time, Jon was only four, maybe five, and the entire experience had been terrifying.

“I know that,” Jon said, doing his best to keep his voice level and not patronizing. “But you'll ruin your tires.”

Kai took a few heaving breaths, and Jon could see he was on the verge of either screaming or crying, or maybe both. “Like I ruin everything.” Kai's voice was a blend of

anger, frustration, shame, and heavy with the suggestion that he was barely keeping himself from a breakdown.

Jon snatched a tea towel and used it to help him gather up the biggest shards of glass, though he tried to keep a cautious eye on his brother. “What are you talking about?”

“Your relationships with Jenny. Vicky. Mine with Becca, Nikki. Renee, too, once she realizes how fucking insane I am. Your chance with the committee. Thanksgiving. Your vacation. Even your fucking coffee.” Kai folded himself into his lap without pushing the glass out of it, and Jon was immediately on his feet again, pushing Kai back up and brushing the glass away. He had to forcibly hold Kai’s chin to check for cuts, but Kai’s cavernous hood had protected his face, and most of the glass had fallen on the floor, anyway.

Jon held Kai’s head in place so he couldn’t hide. “Is that what you really think?”

Kai looked away. It was answer enough.

“Kai . . .” Jon started, but he wasn’t sure what he could say to reassure his brother right now.

Kai brought his eyes back to meet Jon’s, so blue, so sad, so *guilty*. It felt like an eternity, Kai attempting to convey so much without words, without signs, though Jon knew only seconds had passed between them. *Don’t touch me*, Kai had told Jon only hours earlier. *I’m disgusting*. Kai really saw himself that way?

Finally, Kai looked down, around him, over his shoulder, and before Jon could say anything or even react, Kai leaned back and wheeled backwards sharply, out of the path of the glass and toward the opposite end of the kitchen.

“I’ll make toast,” he said, slipping into his monotone voice, his mask firmly in place now. “If I can manage not to fuck that up, too.”

Fortunately, the carafe had shattered in mostly large shards, so it didn’t take too long for Jon to get most of it, though it probably wouldn’t be a bad idea to do a pass with the vacuum to protect Kai’s wheels.

“We could go to the diner for breakfast,” Jon suggested before he realized what he’d said.

Kai’s eyes darkened, and he visibly stiffened. “I can’t go there anymore.”

“Of course you can. You love that place. It’s bad enough you let Nikki’s leaving keep you away from it for so many weeks—”

Jon could see Kai’s jaw working, a subtle shimmer in his eyes, his face almost flickering, like an out-of-alignment TV channel, as he tried to keep his mask in place. “I’m not exactly inconspicuous.”

“It’s a small town, Kai. Everyone knows everyone. That doesn’t mean they care.”

“Everyone doesn’t know everyone. Everyone knows me,” Kai said with more vitriol in his voice. “Don’t **stand** there and fucking tell me I can pretend it didn’t happen,” Kai continued, emphasizing the word “stand.” Kai breathed heavily, staring intensely at Jon, as if he were merely pausing in his tirade, but then he shook his head, and seemingly not caring about his hand or the glass, barreled past Jon and out into the living room.

A few minutes later, Jon found Kai on the couch, his wheelchair disassembled as he carefully examined each tire for any signs of puncture, any hint that he’d snagged some glass that would cause a flat at worst, or a leak, at best. Jon could see Kai’s fingers and

palm were bleeding through their bandages, but if Kai noticed, he didn't seem to care, focusing intently on his task.

"I'm sorry," Jon said, perching at the far end of the sofa to give Kai as much space as possible.

Kai didn't seem to hear him, setting one tire aside and beginning on the second.

"I could make you pancakes," Jon offered after a tense moment of silence. Jon couldn't really eat them, because they spiked his blood sugar too much, but he knew Kai liked them, especially with a little honey added to the batter to make them sweet, even without syrup.

Kai didn't respond. He found a small piece of something, plucked it off the tire, running his fingers over the rubber, squeezing it, seemed satisfied no damage had occurred, and set it aside. He stared down at the frame, but didn't move to reattach the wheels.

"Or we could go get donuts. There's that place that opened—"

Kai held up one hand, though his face was devoid of any emotion. "I'm trying not to throw up my morning meds," he said in the same way you might say, "I got the mail."

Jon sighed. "*You need to eat.*"

"Missing a meal won't kill me," Kai said flatly, pulling his wheelchair frame closer. He took the time to smooth his uninjured hand over it, as if he expected to find a flaw. The dark blue paint was worn off in some places, exposing the metal beneath, but otherwise, it was in almost as good condition as when Kai had first received it four years ago. Kai was meticulous about maintaining his wheelchair, and though he didn't have his tools, he felt each bolt anyway, searching for any that might be loose. Jon suspected it was a way for Kai to keep his hands and mind busy.

Silence stretched.

Finally, Kai spoke again, laying a hand possessively on the frame, his eyes hidden by his hood. "Don't **ever** take my chair away from me again."

Jon blinked, trying to process what Kai was talking about. Shit. Jon had been so exhausted by the time he'd gotten Kai settled he hadn't even thought about it, the dose of Valium he'd taken for himself pulling him rapidly toward unawareness.

"She used to do things like that to me," Kai said in that same eerily emotionless voice. "Take my crutches and braces." Then he snapped the wheels back on the frame in a few quick movements, as if to punctuate the end of the conversation.

The hood shielded Kai's face from the cold of the passenger window, though he could still feel it, dully, through the fabric. Kai's car was still at David's—who had texted several times to unobtrusively ask if Kai was OK and say that he and his father-in-law-to-be would drop by later to give Kai his car back. Jon was grateful David wasn't being pushy—his texts were succinct, delightfully ASL-y, and direct. No false reassurances or insistences that Kai tell David everything. Damn, Kai loved Deafies.

Still, Kai could hardly handle Jon right now, so he'd replied simply with his brother's phone number (not that Megan didn't already have it, obviously), telling David to deal with him for now. Whenever he got his head on straight (ha! if that would ever happen), he promised he'd fill David in.

So Jon was driving, not that he would have let Kai drive anyway with the ridiculous amount of drugs in his system right now. But it also meant Jon had tried,

several times, to alternately explain and apologize for last night, for Tuesday, for everything, because that's what Jon did. He was a martyr. If there was guilt to be had about anything, he'd absorb it for himself, like a human sponge. It made Kai wonder if Jon was like that because of fourteen years of Catholic indoctrination, or if that was just who Jon was. Kai was glad that his only religious exposure had been the Youngs and similar goody-two-shoes missionaries proselytizing to the kids at County House once a month. That, and the creepy Bible-Thumper, "Jesus Loves Me More Than You" clique at the hearing high school, who always carried their bibles under their arms where everyone could see and followed the group leader in two neat rows like she was Jesus reborn and they were apostles. Kai had found them incredibly amusing until they'd decided to make him their project and pray over him at least once a week, convinced that if he would accept Jesus into his heart, he'd be healed. They weren't so entertaining after that, but at least the bullies left him alone when he was surrounded by born-again.

But none of this was Jon's fault. It was easy enough to blame him, at least on the surface, but Kai knew the truth. He was a drain, a worthless parasite, and he always had been. People were better off without him, including—maybe especially—Jon. He felt tears prickle behind his eyes and thumped his head against the glass to shake himself out of it. Dammit, he wasn't going to do that again. Dammit. Dammit. Dammit.

He felt Jon's hand on his shoulder, trying to still him. "Kai, it's OK. Dr. Miller will help you and you'll get through this."

Kai stifled a laugh. Jon was always so confident about everything. He had truly believed, down to the very last day, that Kai would get a transplant. Really, truly believed. If he'd ever doubted, he'd never let it show in front of Kai. Kai sighed heavily, his breath temporarily fogging the glass. He wished he could be so certain.

"You cold?"

Evidently, the shiver had been more visible, even with his coat and oversized sweatshirt, than Kai had thought. Truth was, he was freezing, despite his layers. Probably partially because of the Valium. "Fine," Kai said, not bothering with the rest of the sentence. English was so unnecessarily complicated.

Still, he heard Jon fiddling with the controls, and soon he felt even warmer air blowing on him. He shivered again. It had snowed some time during the night, not heavy, just enough to be annoying and melt and refreeze when the temperature plummeted, making the roads treacherous. Probably extra good Kai wasn't driving. Valium and icy roads didn't mix very well.

Although driving head-on into a tree sounded pretty appealing right now.

Dammit. Dammit. Dammit.

Kai slipped his right hand into the pocket of his sweatshirt, which was large enough it peeked under the hem of his jacket. Kai's fingers found the piece of glass he'd snuck in there earlier. He hadn't intended to break the carafe, but once he had, it was an opportunity he couldn't pass up. In case he needed to remind himself, later, that physical pain was so much easier than trying to deal with the war within his head.

They said crazy people didn't know they were crazy, but Kai couldn't think of any other way to describe the last eighteen hours.

Kai didn't wait for Jon to finish parking when he pushed the door open and heaved, throwing up the little amount of fluid he had in his stomach, hoping enough time had passed that all his meds had already been absorbed. Though part of him didn't care either way.

"Dammit, Kai," Jon swore. "You should have eaten something."

At least that's what Kai thought Jon was saying. He couldn't hear him well as his stomach spasmed again and he tried desperately to throw up more, but he had nothing left. He sank back in his seat, wedging his head in the doorframe, not even bothering to close the door. Not caring about the bitter cold that swept in, his stomach still cramping as if it were disgusted it had to be a part of him.

Don't blame you, Kai thought as he let his eyes shut, cherishing the cold. It was nice to feel something outside of himself, something sharp and painful that had nothing to do with his fucked up head. Pain he could focus on that wouldn't get him committed.

Kai heard that annoying chime that meant the key was still in the ignition but the driver's door was open, and then he felt Jon checking his pulse, and probably talking to him, too, but it was like the combination of low blood sugar and the surge of Valium was making his brain delightfully foggy, and so it was almost like trying to hear underwater.

Even with the nausea, even with the brutal honesty, Kai could start to see how dosing himself up with benzos could be nice. He felt heavy and groggy, but they also made it easier not to care about anything. And of course, there was always the possibility, like yesterday, of OD'ing.

Dammit. He was thinking far too many bad thoughts this morning. And he was so drugged up he wasn't sure if he'd be able to hide it from Dr. Miller, either.

Eventually, though Kai wasn't sure how much time passed—it could have been seconds, could have been minutes—Jon made sure he was out of the way of the door and shut it again. A moment later, Kai felt Jon reenter, the shift of the car with his weight, and then they were moving, presumably to another spot.

Dr. Miller's office was in a small multistory office building with its own parking garage, but it being the day after Thanksgiving, presumably the other businesses—lawyers, accountants, architects, etc.—were all closed, leaving the garage cold and empty.

Kai drifted, waking with a start when he felt his brother tap on the window. Kai forced himself away from the door as Jon opened it. He'd already assembled Kai's chair, and seemed to be unsure of how Kai would react. He really didn't want Jon to touch him right now; as illogical as it seemed, it was like Kai would contaminate Jon somehow. Honestly, Kai just wanted to pull himself out of the car, curl up on the cold concrete floor and let the sound of the wind howling through the garage wash over him, monstrous whooshing sounds, as if the structure were some kind of snoring beast that would swallow him up.

It was hard to keep his eyes open, and sleep would be so nice, because, barring nightmares, it was an escape.

Jon's hands were on him, and Kai was too tired to push him away. "Jesus, Kai. You're freezing. I should take your blood pressure."

Kai managed to shake his head. "*FINE*," he signed lazily. He batted Jon out of the way and barely managed to make the transfer himself without falling on his ass.

"I'm worried about you," Jon said in a low voice that mostly got swallowed by the roar of the wind.

"Join the club," Kai said tiredly, pushing slowly toward the entrance.

Even though Kai had joked, during their last meeting, that he would never sit in the recliner again, he'd insisted upon it, climbing into it with both his brother's and Dr. Miller's help, but only after turning it so he could still see the entrance leading to the

waiting room, which meant Dr. Miller had to switch to another chair to keep line of sight. At Kai's insistence, Jon left the door open behind him, propping it open with a chair, and assuring Kai he'd be in the waiting room if he needed him.

Kai had shifted his body so that he was lying sideways, his legs tucked, his head lazily draped on the arm cushion. As long-limbed as Kai was, it didn't seem like a very comfortable position, though it was defensive and defeated and perhaps projected more about Kai's current mood than anything he could have told her. She also noticed he was dressed in baggy sweats, the giant hood masking most of his face, his golden hair uncharacteristically brushed so it covered his eyes. Kai was hiding himself with his hair and clothes and posture, whether he realized it or not.

"How are you feeling this morning, Kai?"

"Medicated," he said flatly, his voice coming out a little muffled.

Dr. Miller suspected today's session was potentially going to be as difficult as their first. "Does the Valium help?"

Kai shrugged.

"Kai."

He sighed. "No. Give me enough to kill a normal person and it knocks me out for a little while. It controls some of the physical anxiety symptoms, but it doesn't stop my brain from having a crazy party, if that's what you're asking." Kai's voice was tired, but not in the sense of exhaustion or weariness from the drugs. Rather, it was more exasperation. She remembered how initially he'd been convinced he couldn't be helped, and she wondered if he was thinking that now, too.

She didn't bother to chastise him for using the word "crazy," though she did find his phrasing—*kill a normal person*—interesting. "Kai, have you hurt yourself since I saw you Tuesday morning?"

She heard the leather squelch as he shifted, lifting his head, peering at her through his hair. "Technically, no," he said, and she saw the hint of a grimace, as if he hadn't intended to be that forthcoming.

"Technically?"

He sighed, as if he knew she wouldn't let him leave it at that, even though he didn't want to go into it. "Jon and I got into a fight Tuesday afternoon. He told me I was selfish and needed to get over myself and that he was moving out." Dr. Miller couldn't see Kai's face, but she could hear the subtle tremble in his voice, like he was trying to speak dispassionately but failing.

"Yes, he mentioned that to me yesterday."

Kai reached over to push his hair out of his eyes, to see Dr. Miller more clearly. "When?"

"Yesterday afternoon, he brought you home and you had another flashback, and he had to give you more diazepam because you were getting hysterically violent. Do you remember that?"

Kai pushed himself up some more. "I'm not sure," he said, confusion and surprise in his voice. "Everything's all fucked up in my memory."

Dr. Miller tapped her pen on her notebook. "He was very worried about you, concerned some of the things he'd said had pushed you . . ." Dr. Miller corrected her wording. "Had been hard for you to deal with."

Kai seemed shaken, pushing himself up so he was sitting, though he gathered his legs to his chest again. "Why am I not strapped to a hospital bed right now?"

Kai's perceptiveness never ceased to amaze Dr. Miller, even heavily medicated

and not fully himself. “Jon was worried you’d think he had betrayed you.”

Kai took in a harsh breath. “When I got home and saw he’d moved out, I . . .” Kai dropped his forehead to his knees, his voice coming out a muffling echo. “I wanted to grab a knife and just cut until that was the only hurt I could feel.”

“But you didn’t?”

She saw a subtle shake of his head in response. “Instead, I got drunk. I spent Tuesday night and all Wednesday drunk.”

Dr. Miller scribbled some notes furiously. Kai had admitted to physically harming himself from time to time, but never anything substance related. Considering the veritable pharmaceutical bonanza that had to exist in Kai’s medicine cabinet at home, this revelation was concerning. “Is that something you’ve done before?”

“What?”

“Drink yourself into oblivion?”

Kai shook his head again. “I don’t like alcohol. But it was that or risk doing worse with the knife, so . . .”

“And what about drugs?”

Kai hesitated a long moment before finally replying with a defeated sigh. “No . . . not . . . not really . . . but . . . it’s been on my mind lately.”

Dr. Miller took a deep breath, set her notepad and pen down for a moment so she could give Kai her full focus. “Kai, have you thought about suicide?”

Kai trembled, which she heard in his breathing more than saw with that cavernous sweatshirt. “Yes. I don’t want to, but it keeps popping into my head.” He released his legs, slipping his hands into the pocket of his hoodie.

“Why?”

Kai shook his head. “I guess . . . I guess, especially yesterday—today—fuck, my last freak out was only a few hours ago.” His shoulders trembled again, as if he were trying to keep his control but it was struggling to break through anyway. “It feels like . . .” Kai shook his head.

“Like what, Kai? It’s OK.”

Kai took in a breath, as if it were a struggle to get the air to enter his body. “Like I’ve lost whatever bit of sanity I had left. Whatever ounce of control I still had. Like there is no light at the end of the tunnel, and whether I want it or not, I’m going to hurt myself.” Kai was surprisingly calm, and despite his insistence that the Valium didn’t work, Dr. Miller suspected it was responsible.

“It’s not uncommon to feel depressed and even suicidal after a crisis,” Dr. Miller said, choosing her words carefully. “But a flashback—which is what you’ve experienced—is not psychosis. It may feel like you’re losing touch with reality, but it’s really a dissociative experience. Think of it almost like a particularly vivid daydream, only these visions are from your memory. Does that make sense?”

Kai swept his hair off his face for a moment, and she saw his eyes were raw and desperate, like he might have broken down into one of his sobbing fits if the drugs weren’t restraining him. Still, he looked particularly defeated. And not terribly convinced. “I don’t remember most of what happened yesterday, between losing myself in these . . . flashbacks and all the drugs. And you’re telling me that’s normal.”

“Normal for someone with PTSD, yes.”

“Sometimes, when I’m in a bad panic attack, like the one I had at the diner, I think I’m going to die, and I welcome it, because it’ll mean it’s over. Why do I keep thinking about it now even when I’m . . .” Kai seemed to search for the word. “Fine?” He

laughed bitterly. “Dammit, if I’m fine, then the pope’s Jewish.”

“What are you thinking about right now, Kai?”

Kai was still a long moment before he finally pulled a hand from inside the pocket of his hoodie. He opened his palm, revealing a large shard of glass.

A surge of dread reflexively shot through Dr. Miller’s body as she quickly rose to take the glass. It was clean, though Kai had cuts on his left fingers and palm. They weren’t fresh, though.

“Kai?”

He held up his left hand. “That happened early this morning, during a flashback,” he said, waving it away. “That,” he said, indicating the glass, “broke a few hours ago and I’ve been wanting to use it ever since.”

“But you didn’t,” Dr. Miller said, staring at it. With Kai’s strength, even on the muscle relaxant, if he had wanted to, he could have done some serious harm to himself.

He sighed heavily, almost as if he were disappointed with himself that he *hadn’t* used the glass, that he’d given it up. Telling. “No. Other than the alcohol and some questionable judgments, and whatever shit I do to myself when I’m lost in a *memory*,” he said, his voice dripping with scorn on the final word, “I haven’t hurt myself.”

She knew he wasn’t lying, so she finally returned to her seat. “Have you given any more consideration to hospitalization?”

Kai hesitated, then finally nodded. “It probably makes me even more crazy that the appeal of being drugged unconscious is greater than my fear of being locked up?”

That made Dr. Miller frown sternly. But she let herself focus. The theme here, between Kai’s suicidal and self-harming thoughts and magnetism toward chemical assistance was escape (which she’d recalled he’d said he had used sex for in the past). “What are you so afraid of, Kai? It’s more than the flashbacks. I know you better than that.”

Kai looked at her, surprised again, perhaps at the shift in direction. “I don’t understand.”

“I think you do.”

Kai was silent a long moment, contemplating, staring longingly at the confiscated glass, almost as if he wished he hadn’t relinquished it.

“What are you so desperate to escape right now? Did something other than the flashbacks happen yesterday?”

Kai reached up and fiddled with his hood, as if he were debating pulling it down farther and further hiding in it. “I ran into Nikki yesterday morning,” Kai said on a sigh.

Dr. Miller’s eyebrows went up reflexively. “And?”

“She tried to pretend like nothing happened, like we could just pick up where we left off.”

“And?”

“I told her I was with Renee, but . . .” Kai shook his head.

Dr. Miller waited for Kai to finish.

“I’m still attracted to her. But I told her off and then I went and threw up, and then I broke down and sobbed like a fucking kindergartener.” Kai’s voice rose in his usual self-directed anger.

Dr. Miller scribbled a few notes. “Do you remember what happened before your first ‘freak out’—to use your words—that prompted you to come to me initially?”

She saw Kai freeze. “No,” he tried, though what she could see of his face revealed he didn’t expect her to believe the lie.

“Kai.”

He sighed heavily, rubbed his arm with one hand. Could the sedating effects of the diazepam be wearing off already? “Becca.”

Dr. Miller nodded, added her name to a list in one portion of her notes. “And do you remember one of the main topics of our last meeting?”

Kai hesitated, not that he had to think, but more like he didn’t want to answer. “Re,” he finally replied resignedly.

Another name for the list. “So you have your first major panic attack and series of nightmares in recent memory after Becca reappears in your life. Then Nikki leaves you and you have another major breakdown. Renee goes home for the week and you have a panic attack in public, coincidentally after your first sexual experience with her. . . .” Kai looked like he was going to interrupt, but Dr. Miller kept talking. She wasn’t going to let him derail her. “And Nikki shows up again and that afternoon you have your first flashback. I don’t believe in coincidences.”

Kai pushed his hair off his face, toward the top of his head, where it stayed for a few seconds before slowly creeping back down. Still, it gave her enough time to see how stricken he looked.

“Becca left you when you were vulnerable. So did Nikki, even if she supposedly had good intentions. And you’re convinced that Renee is going to leave you, too, again, when you’re vulnerable, once she figures out the ‘real’ you. Add to the fact that your brother, the one person—except perhaps your friend David, while you lived at County House—who has been a certainty in your life before and since those twelve years might suddenly be not so constant.” Dr. Miller fixed her gaze on Kai. “That’s a lot of stress, Kai.”

Kai’s eyebrows furrowed threateningly, but there was no malice in his voice when he spoke. “What are you saying?”

Dr. Miller softened her tone. “You were abused by your aunt, and you are re-experiencing memories of that abuse. You never really dealt with that before, just did your best to bury it and pretend it didn’t affect you. But the past few months have brought everything back to light, and I think Becca was likely the trigger.” Dr. Miller looked at Kai earnestly, though it was impossible to see his eyes between his hair and the hood. “I think part of the reason you’re struggling so much with nightmares and flashbacks is because of your overarching fears of abandonment and self-esteem issues, feelings of worthlessness and helplessness. Those memories are a perfect echo of the inner turmoil you’ve been going through since your transplant.”

Kai laughed, though it was defensive, hollow, forced. “You couldn’t have sounded more like a shrink in those last sentences unless you’d thrown in ‘Oedipus complex’ or something.”

Dr. Miller chose to ignore his snark. “What do you remember of your life before your parents died?”

Dr. Miller wasn’t sure if it was the effects of the drug dimming Kai’s normally sharp-as-steel, cut-through-bullshit mind, but she’d totally thrown him off guard, again. “What?”

“What memories do you have from before you went to County House?”

Kai rolled his neck, which cracked loudly. “Not many,” he admitted. “I remember Halloween 1983, because it was the only time I went trick-or-treating. I

remember bits of that winter, because I was sick with pneumonia for a long time. Most of my memories are less concrete, like, bits and pieces I couldn't say when they were from. I remember Jon feeding me and playing with me and signing with me. I remember him pounding my back and helping me cough. I remember him bathing me and holding me when I was having trouble breathing. I remember him reading to me. Stretching and massaging my legs when they hurt." Kai took in a breath, his eyes rolled back as if he were searching the ceiling for answers. "I remember my sister, vaguely. I think she had dark hair, unlike Jon and me, but bright blue eyes like mine. I remember she was always whining that Jon treated me different and that he would yell at her and not at me. I remember her complaining it wasn't fair that I got more attention than she did. I remember being jealous of her, that she could talk and I couldn't, and that she didn't have problems walking or breathing. That her legs never hurt her. That Mom loved her more." Kai blinked, as if he seemed surprised at what he'd said, like he'd been following some trail in his mind, not realizing where it would take him.

"Do you notice a trend in these memories, however fragmented and non-specific they may be?"

"I'm sure you're going to tell me," Kai said wearily. Kai definitely wasn't himself. Exhausted physically and mentally, probably partially because of the Valium, partially because of the last twenty-four hours.

"You haven't mentioned your parents at all. All of those memories involve Jon. And not just Jon, but Jon acting in a parental role. How much older than you is he?"

Kai rubbed his face, as if he were trying to stay awake. "Almost eight years."

"So, in 1983 you were how old? Five?"

Kai nodded.

"For the sake of argument, let's say your memories start then, though I'm sure some of them are older. That would have made Jon thirteen?"

Kai shrugged.

"And I'm assuming that you needed more care as a young child than a typical kid of your age did."

Kai scowled.

"I don't mean that in a judgmental way, Kai. You know this is a judgment-free zone. I'm just trying to lay the facts out."

Kai sighed. "Yeah. I had major breathing problems until I was about seven, when they leveled out a little for awhile. And I don't remember, but according to Jon, I didn't really walk until I was three, and that was only after a lot of physical therapy and with orthotics. And of course, I didn't talk, and apparently had problems eating for my first few years." Kai sighed. "I'm not normal; we know that. Do we have to talk about this?"

Dr. Miller decided to ignore his use of the word "normal" for now. "I'm trying to make the point that Jon is a 'protector.' It's fairly typical for the oldest child in an abusive family to grow up quickly, become a 'little adult' and assume the roles that the parental figures aren't serving. Making sure everyone's fed, that the clothes are washed, the other children are cared for. . . ."

Kai pushed himself up, his back straight, his hood falling off. "You're saying our parents were abusive? That that's why I don't remember them, because of repression or some shit like that?" Kai was getting angry, which Dr. Miller actually saw as a good sign, because the relative apathy of the rest of the session, combined with his admitted suicidal ideations, had concerned her. Anger meant he was engaged.

“Not necessarily, at least not intentionally. But they were obviously absent in some way if your brother felt compelled—even at age thirteen, perhaps younger than that—to step in and take care of you.”

Kai blinked.

“My point is that you remember Jon, not your parents, because potentially he was the only significant parental figure in your life, for whatever reason.”

Kai seemed to let that sink in. “So I was fucked up before I even got to County House, let alone my summer of fun.”

Dr. Miller scribbled a note about Kai’s sardonic reference to the time he spent with his aunt, but nodded. “The fact that one of your memories from that time is being jealous your mother cared for your sister more than you is telling, don’t you think?”

Kai’s forehead wrinkled, just barely visible beneath his hair. “I always believed they didn’t love me because I was . . . broken,” Kai said in a small voice. “Jon says our dad did, but I don’t remember him at all.”

“Do you see yourself as broken?”

Dr. Miller heard Kai swallow, turn his head, look down, clearly ashamed. Without a word, Kai brushed his bangs back over his eyes, resecured his hood, and settled himself down into his original position from the start of the session, making himself as small and invisible as possible, which spoke volumes.

Still, Dr. Miller worried she was losing Kai again, as he seemed to be shutting down fast. “Tell me what you’re feeling right now.”

Kai didn’t answer, but she realized he was crying softly.

“It’s all right, Kai, but I can’t help you if you don’t talk to me.”

“Please,” Kai pleaded. “Please don’t make me talk about this.”

That struck Dr. Miller. If Kai didn’t want to talk about something, he didn’t. He got angry. He got snarky. He artfully changed the subject. This was Kai more like he’d been that day in the hospital, when he’d been suffering from Valium withdrawals. She added that to her notes. “What do you want to talk about, then?”

The question surprised Kai, and she heard him snuffle, take a breath. “Why is this happening to me?”

“What, Kai?” she asked, pressing him to be more specific.

“Why am I losing myself?” Kai’s voice was full of such raw despair it pushed through Dr. Miller’s shields and made her even more determined to ensure Kai left her office feeling at least a little better. She remembered Kai talking before, briefly, about how he didn’t know who he was anymore, post-transplant. It wasn’t a topic he talked about much, but she’d gleaned that he definitely had identity issues. She wrote, *Self and identity dysregulation?* and boxed it in, hoping it was something she could tackle more later.

“What do you mean?” Dr. Miller queried, hoping to get Kai to elaborate before he shut down again.

“It’s like . . . I’ve never been able to control my body. It does what it wants. Always has. But my mind? That’s always been **mine**, and I feel like lately . . .” Dr. Miller heard more quiet tears before Kai finally explained, “It’s like I’ve lost it, in more ways than one. Like I’ve lost myself. . . . **That’s** why this is so . . . why I’m so . . .” Kai was breathing a little faster.

“It’s all right, Kai. Remember, it’s OK to express your emotions. How does ‘losing yourself’ make you feel?”

“I’m scared.” She heard the shudder in Kai’s voice, saw him grip his legs tighter

to his body. “I’ve never walked well, I couldn’t talk most of my life, and that’s why . . .” Kai hesitated. “I was weak, and people took advantage of that. I don’t want to be weak, but . . . I can’t control my body. I can’t control that I’m probably not cured, and that not only affects me but others. Jon. . . . This patient of his who won’t get a transplant because of **me**. He’s just a fucking kid, Dr. M.” Kai paused, the only sound his ragged breathing as he struggled to collect himself. “That’s why Jon and I fought.” A long pause, where Kai didn’t even seem to be breathing, and when he finally made a sound, Dr. Miller realized he’d been attempting to prevent himself from breaking down into more tears, quiet weeping sounds seeping out despite his attempts to stop them. “And now . . . I can’t even control my consciousness? Whether I hurt someone? Myself? What the fuck is left of **me**? I can’t even trust what’s real and what isn’t.”

Feeling weak—broken, as he’d indirectly admitted to earlier—out of control, and guilty were all pretty par for the course with someone with a history like Kai’s, but it was good to see him admitting to some of it at least, instead of avoiding the subject, as he had earlier. “I can understand why you find this frightening, but you know no one is fully in control of themselves at all times—”

“I’m so scared of losing everyone. Jon.” Kai’s voice broke. “I really thought . . . I’d never seen him angry like that before, not at me. And he took all his insulin with him. . . .” Kai let out a short sob. “David. What the fuck have I ever done for him, other than interpret from time to time? All I do is use him. All I do is use everyone. Jon. Nikki. Re. . . .” Kai broke down in earnest now, either giving up on trying to contain his tears or losing the battle. He buried his face completely in the hood, his hair, and his knees, crying for a long while. “I’m so, so scared of ending up alone. All alone.”

Dr. Miller was beginning to wonder if Kai’s fears of abandonment and isolation were more than symptoms of his history and the abuse he’d suffered, certainly pathological. He hadn’t given her any indications that he had the desperation of preventing said abandonment in the same way someone with BPD might, but she wondered if part of his fears about “losing himself” were an extension of that same terror of aloneness. Madness, even if it wasn’t true insanity in the sense of psychosis, was certainly isolating, especially if it forced Kai to relive the moments in which he felt most alone, the most helpless, in his life.

“Do you know what a self-fulfilling prophecy is?” she asked, hoping to dig a little deeper into the issue.

Kai let out a sound of confused surprise.

“It’s when you believe something so strongly that you make it true.” Dr. Miller shifted in her seat. “I see it a lot in patients who’ve suffered abuse. You’re convinced that bad things will happen. That people will leave you, so, consciously or not, you sabotage.”

Kai pushed himself up, partially, so he wasn’t one with the recliner, which was potentially good. The hint of anger in his voice was good, too. “So, what, I’m so pathetic that I have to create drama, like yesterday, to keep people from leaving me? Like, I was so afraid of losing Jon forever I went crazy just to get him back and keep him close? So now you’re going to tell me I’m fucking Munchausen or something, like I make all this shit up because I’m so fucking scared of being alone?” What Dr. Miller could see of Kai’s eyes were angry, though a few stray tears traced down his cheeks anyway. “Or maybe, I do this shit so people **will** leave me, so I can blame them instead of me?” His eyes widened with realization, though she could only see one eye clearly through his hair and hood. “That’s what I did with Becca and Nikki, didn’t I?” His gaze was directed downward as he continued, speaking almost to himself. “I was going to do that with

Renee, too.” Kai suddenly became very agitated. “Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.” She saw one of his hands dive into his pocket, and she jumped up, worried that he might have another piece of glass, but then he let out a harsh sound of frustration, as if he’d forgotten he’d given it to her. “It would be easy to use all this shit to push her away.” Kai crumpled. “Dammit. I love her,” he said, surprised as the words spilled out. It surprised Dr. Miller, too, who, knowing the limited details of his relationship with Becca, hadn’t believed Kai would be capable of admitting love so soon. “But what we have isn’t real.”

That got Dr. Miller’s attention. “What do you mean by that?”

“It can’t be real. It can’t last,” Kai said, his breathing quickening. “Look at me. I’m a fucking mess. I pissed myself last night because I was so fucking . . .” Kai grunted as if he didn’t want to admit it. “. . . scared, lost in another fucking waking nightmare. Re deserves so much better. Someone who isn’t such a needy, insecure little bitch. Fuck. Dammit. Fuck.” Kai was hitting the chair, as if he were desperately in need of throwing something, his chest jerking like he wanted to sob again but couldn’t quite get there because of his anger. He let out a frustrated scream, reaching up to pull at his hair, breathing heavily.

Dr. Miller inched toward her desk.

“Maybe I should let her see me like this, so she can get scared off for good and . . .” Kai was rambling, as if his thoughts were just spilling out uncensored. “And that’s exactly what you mean, self-sabotage, right?”

Dr. Miller found her stash of Xanax and tapped out a single quarter of a pill, a small dose. “You admitted to me that Renee makes you happy, that she makes you feel free, alive. Safe.” She headed for her mini fridge to grab a bottled water.

“She does. God, she makes me feel like no one else ever has, not even Becca, not even Nikki. . . . Sex with her was even something completely different. With Becca it was . . .” He hesitated, shook his head. “A way for her to control me, I think,” Kai said, his words full of disgust, his hand on his stomach as if he were going to throw up. “Dammit.” He took a few steadying breaths. “And Nikki was about escape. Forgetting. But Re. With Re. . . .” Kai sighed. “I almost didn’t care about getting off. How fucked up is that? I just . . . I just wanted to be with her and make her feel good, make her not regret being with me.” Kai’s agitation was growing, his hands searching for something to keep them occupied. “With her it’s just.” He sighed, frustrated he couldn’t explain himself. “When I’m with her, everything is . . . peaceful. Like, I dunno, like it can’t be real, because it’s too perfect. Life isn’t like that.” Kai shook his head, almost violently, as if doing so could toss the thoughts physically out of his head. “This is so stupid. I’m so stupid.” Kai whacked his head with the base of his fists. “I let her trust me and I’m just going to totally destroy her.” Kai’s anger didn’t ebb, but he soon dissolved into tears. “All these memories . . . all these years I told myself it wasn’t true,” Kai said, almost babbling to himself, cupping his hands over his eyes. “What if . . . everything she ever said . . . everything the bullies in school ever said . . . what if they were right about me?”

“Kai,” Dr. Miller soothed, snagging one hand and offering him the bottle.

“Drink some water. Have you ever taken Xanax before?”

Kai obeyed, sniffing, eager to take out some of his frustration on the bottle, swallowing a few gulps greedily. “Yes. Once that I know of. My first freakout Nikki gave me some.”

“And it worked for you?”

Kai seemed confused, but not so much by the question, more at having been derailed. He nodded.

“Here,” she said, offering him the pill. “I think this’ll help you right now.”

Kai took it, stared at it a moment, checked her eyes as if he didn’t trust her, but finally, he swallowed the pill. Then he let some of the tension go out of his body, sinking back into his defeated, secure position.

“I know you don’t think so,” Dr. Miller said, retaking her seat, “but flashbacks can be a sign of recovery. It means you’re ready to face your traumas head on and move past them.”

Kai sighed heavily. He was shaking, almost shivering, wrapping his arms tighter around his legs.

“Some therapists like their patients to deal with the flashbacks without drugs, but I believe you’re also dealing with depression, something I think you’ve been struggling with since your transplant. Would you agree with me?”

Kai let out a long sigh. “Is now the time you tell me my ‘suicidal ideation’ is an extension of my ‘inability to accept my continued survival,’ or something like that?” Kai’s words were mocking, as if he were quoting his previous therapist, but he just sounded tired. The reality was, Dr. Miller suspected part of Kai’s problems did arise from that, from a combination of twisted survivor’s guilt to what essentially amounted to Adjustment Disorder—Kai’s struggle to accept his new life, post-transplant.

“What do you think?”

Kai grunted. After Dr. Miller said nothing, though, he finally spoke. “I spent most of my life being told I wasn’t going to live, or I was going to die young. I didn’t really expect I’d make it to eighteen, and I spent most of the time between then and now actively dying. I never expected to be here, to go to school and meet a girl who could be . . .” She could hear Kai’s breathing slow as the medicine began to work. He shook his head and looked away, as if he were shutting down again.

“Could be what, Kai?” Dr. Miller prompted when it didn’t seem like Kai was going to continue on his own.

Kai sighed heavily, wiped his eyes with his sleeves, then dropped them, staring down at them to avoid her gaze. “It’s gay as fuck, I know, but . . . I just . . . wanted someone to love me.” Kai let the words hang in the air for a moment as Dr. Miller wrote that down. It wasn’t a surprising admission based on Kai’s history and the types of things he’d revealed to her before, but it was good for him to say it out loud, blatantly. Kai looked up through the curtain of his hair. “Not because they were obligated or forced or dared or wanted to fuck around with my head. I thought I had that with Becca, but I was stupid and naive. . . . I’m pretty sure Re loves me, though how, I have no fucking idea.” Kai’s voice hitched, like he was going to break down again, but he didn’t. “I never really planned for my future, because I never thought I’d have a future. And now I have Re, and . . .” Kai did break down now, but it was a quiet intensity, perhaps mediated by the Xanax. “. . . I want everything with her. I want it so bad it terrifies me, because it’s easy not to care about something you know you can never have. Right?” He pushed his hair out of his face, revealing red-rimmed, desperate-looking eyes. “Like, I’ve never walked normally, so it’s not something I miss, right? How can you miss something you’ve never had, that you’ll never have?” Considering Kai’s issues with feeling “broken” or not “normal,” and lacking control, and his admission, earlier, that the labels (such as “freak” and “fucked up” and “worthless”) given to him by his aunt and others might be “true,” Dr. Miller wondered how honest Kai was being, not just with her, but with himself. Dr. Miller didn’t interrupt, though, making a note to explore the concept later.

“But . . .” Kai wasn’t bothering to hide his tears, looking through them toward

Dr. Miller like the last puppy in a litter staring out, alone, from the glass of a pet shop, certain no one would ever take him home. “I want forever with Re. Dammit. How fucking sentimental is that? I haven’t even fucking known her that long. I’m such a fucking idiot.” Kai’s swearing always increased when he got particularly angry with himself. He shook his head as more tears fell. Wiped his nose with the back of his hand. “I want it, but I don’t even know if I can survive today. I don’t know if I deserve it, even if I can.”

Dr. Miller took her own deep breath. “First of all, Kai, thank you for being so open with me. I know that wasn’t easy for you.”

Kai breathed out noisily, sunk down into the recliner, his eyelids drooping. The Xanax, probably.

“Second, no one can give anyone ‘forever.’ That’s one reason marriage vows are until ‘death do us part.’ Third, desiring love is normal for anyone, but especially someone who grew up largely without parental affection. You’ve told me about County House; you didn’t exactly have a mother or father figure there. You talk about that experience as if it were incarceration. So it’s understandable for someone like you to crave the intimacy you never had growing up.” Dr. Miller took a deep breath. “But most importantly, wanting something you’re not sure you can have is part of life, Kai. And you’ve been blessed with life, whether it’s a week or a decade or more. Life is scary, but have you ever really let fear stop you from doing what you wanted?”

Kai shrugged. Either the drug was combining with the Valium in his system and making him groggy, or he was simply psychologically exhausted. Both were legitimate possibilities.

“Death is easy. The dead have no problems, no fears, no doubts. I think it’s very possible that part of you wishes you hadn’t been transplanted, that you had died last year, so you can fantasize about not needing to deal with any of the difficult emotions that have plagued you since then.”

Fresh tears spilled out of Kai’s eyes, but he said nothing.

“I think there’s a reason why you find talking about your last couple years pre-transplant harder than talking about the summer you spent with your aunt.” Dr. Miller grabbed the box of tissues from the nearby table, rose, and offered them to Kai. “But think of all the things you have gotten to experience in the last year. Yes, you’ve had heartache, but you’ve also had happiness and love. You won’t say the word, but I know you’ve wanted to. You see Renee as ‘the one,’ and maybe you’re wrong, but how many people at twenty-two—or even at any age—can say they’ve found that kind of love in their life? And that doesn’t count your brother, who I know would insulate you from every hurt in the world if it was in his power, he loves you that much. He got angry with you because he loves you. Does this make sense?”

Kai blew his nose, coughed for several minutes, wheezing, then coughed some more. Kai nodded.

“I consider myself pretty conservative when it comes to prescribing for my patients, but I would like to propose two additions to your medications, if you’ll hear me out.”

Kai grabbed more tissues, coughed more, wiped his face. The Xanax really did seem to work for him; he was far more serene than he was before, and it wasn’t the stoned, dead look of the Valium, either. He nodded.

“I’d like to consider offering you Xanax, to take on an emergency basis, like yesterday, when the hydroxyzine and mindfulness aren’t enough.”

Kai used another tissue to wipe some gunk out of his eyes. “I know you just gave me some, but can I really take Xanax and Valium together?”

“I’d prefer, under normal circumstances, you didn’t. But you can, if you’re careful. But I think it’d be best if you kept only a dose or two on you at a time, and let Jon hold onto your benzodiazepines for you. Especially at a time like this. Do you understand?”

“So I don’t kill myself,” Kai said flatly.

Dr. Miller decided there was no reason to sugarcoat it. “Yes. Especially since you might not even do it entirely intentionally. You might simply be hoping to turn off your pain, and when one pill doesn’t work, you’ll take another, and another. . . . The Xanax clearly works for you, Kai,” Dr. Miller said pointedly. “That was only half a milligram.”

Kai laughed. “I think yesterday I had like, 14, 20 milligrams of Valium at once, combined between pills and shots. Probably would’ve killed a normal person.” Ten milligrams was usually considered the maximum dose, but Kai had a tolerance from taking the drug for so many years.

Dr. Miller frowned. “If you don’t think you can trust yourself, be honest with me, Kai.”

“I don’t trust myself,” Kai said without hesitation. “But I do trust Jon. He won’t let me hurt myself, not if he can help it.”

Dr. Miller nodded. “I also want you to consider an antidepressant called Celexa. It’s very effective for anxiety. I’ve seen patients respond within only a few days; most within a week or two. It may also eventually help with your mood. I know you’re happy when you’re with Renee, and it’s good that she helps with your anxiety, too. But you know you can’t rely on other people to make you feel good about yourself.”

Kai laughed derisively at that, but nodded.

“I’ll talk to Jon, and you two can discuss whether it’s something you want to try or not.” She smiled faintly. “How are you feeling right now?”

“A little better,” Kai admitted. “But that’s like asking the guy who barely survived a T5 tornado that destroyed his house around him if he’s fine.”

Dr. Miller nodded. “Try to wean off the Valium and take the Xanax four times a day in its place for the next couple days. Relax. I can’t promise you won’t have any more flashbacks, but you can try some of the techniques you use for your anxiety to moderate them. Stimulating your senses when you suspect one might be coming can help. It won’t always prevent the memory, but it can help shift your focus so you’re watching them instead of living them.”

Kai nodded weakly. “Would you . . . would you be disappointed in me if I used rubber bands again for a little while?”

“Kai,” Dr. Miller said gently, “you don’t need my approval.” Though it was telling he felt he did. “I’m not here to judge you, remember? If you think you need a way to release your self-harming urges in a way that is relatively harmless, then go ahead. Are you feeling that urge right now?”

Kai looked so ashamed, like a young boy who wanted nothing more than for his parent to be proud of him. Which, in some ways, even as an orphan, Kai still wanted. “The past few days, it hasn’t really gone away. . . . Before the first flashback, I was looking for something to hurt myself with, anything I could find in my friend’s bathroom, but there wasn’t anything. And this whole time, it’s been hovering in the back of my mind, kind of like . . . kind of like when you’re too busy to eat, but you’re really

hungry, and it keeps trying to pull your attention away. If that makes sense?”

“Let’s try an exercise before we go. I wasn’t sure you were ready for this quite yet, but it’s not something you can ‘master’ overnight; it can take weeks, even months, but you might find it helpful. It’s called the Circle of Forgiveness. It’s a mindfulness exercise.”

Dr. Miller had expected Kai to resist, at least say something sardonic, as he professed an outward scorn for therapeutic exercises in general, though later, he often would (reluctantly) admit they were helpful. Instead, he simply said, “OK.”

“Close your eyes and imagine you’re in a beautiful park in early summer. It’s warm, but not hot, and the birds are chirping. Somewhere, in the distance, you can hear the laughter of a party, or maybe a game, people having fun. You can smell the grass . . .” Dr. Miller half expected Kai to interrupt here, as he sometimes would, to say that fresh-cut grass made him wheeze, but he didn’t. He seemed to be cooperating, and she thought, however inappropriately, that maybe she should drug him with Xanax before sessions more often. “Someone, maybe at the party, is grilling, the scent of charcoal floating in the air. You’re peaceful. Content. You’re alone, but you’re not lonely; you’re not scared. You don’t ache anywhere; your muscles are loose. You’re breathing slow and deep and relaxed.”

“It’s a beautiful day,” Kai added sleepily. “The sky is bright blue and clear, with only a few clouds, and there’s a warm breeze that feels like a delicate touch on my skin.” Kai sighed softly. He normally was never this cooperative.

“That’s good,” she encouraged. “In the distance, you see people approaching you from all sides, but they’re not threatening. You’re not scared at all. In fact, you’re happy they’re coming closer. Once they get about ten feet away, they form a circle around you, and you can feel hope and love radiating from them. These are people who you need to forgive, or who you want to forgive you. Who do you see, Kai?”

Kai let out a long breath. Again, he answered genuinely, surprising her. “My mom and dad. Jon. Becca, Nikki, Renee. David. Art. Ms. Evans. Jake. Jo. Vicky. Jenny. Troy. Dr. J. Martin.” Kai’s voice broke on that last name, and though he named a few other people, Dr. Miller couldn’t distinctly tell all of them until he finally said, “My aunt.”

“That’s good, Kai. Now, I want you to imagine going up to each person you need to forgive, look them in the eyes, and I want you to call them by name and tell them, ‘I forgive you for hurting me. I release you. You have no power over me any more. Go in peace.’ Take as much time as you need, Kai, and don’t be afraid of the emotions that might arise with each person. You might find it hard to say those words, even in your mind, to some of these people. It can take time. But I want you to try, OK?”

Over the next few minutes, Dr. Miller coached Kai through the exercise, which did bring up some strong emotions—particularly with his parents—though perhaps not as strong as if he hadn’t been on the benzodiazepines.

“I can’t,” he said, though, at one point.

“What can’t you do?”

“I can’t picture my aunt. I can’t believe she’d be there.”

“That’s OK, Kai. You can work on that. This isn’t something that can be done right or wrong; it’s a process, and it takes time. I want you to watch the people you forgave walk away. You feel their relief and happiness; it’s also yours. Now the circle is filled with those people whom you may have hurt and who need to ask you for forgiveness. Do you see them?”

He laughed, but it was tinged with tears, his voice emotional. “There’s more of them than the other group.”

Considering how much guilt and shame Kai carried around with him, that didn’t surprise her at all. “There’s one person that might not be there, but I want you to picture him. Can you do that? Can you picture yourself, looking at yourself? Like you’re one of the group, but you’re also still in the center of it.”

Kai took in a wheezy breath. “I can’t look at myself,” he admitted, his voice pained.

She knew he didn’t mean he couldn’t picture it in his mind, like with his aunt, but rather, that he couldn’t meet his own gaze. “Why, Kai?”

Kai seemed reluctant to respond initially, finally admitting, “Because you need to respect someone to look them in their eyes, right?” He sighed.

Dr. Miller jotted that down. “I know he’s probably the hardest person to face, but I want you to imagine him approaching you. I want you to picture him telling you—in sign or English, whatever is easier for you—that he forgives you. Telling you, ‘Kai, I forgive you for hurting me. I release you. You have no power over me anymore. Go in peace.’”

Kai started to sob, his eyes still closed, his hands held up in front of him, moving in what she knew had to be signs, though she would never have been able to make out anything more than some pointing and blurred fingers.

Kai then opened his eyes. His face was a grimace, almost as if he were in physical pain. “Please don’t make me do any more,” he said softly.

“It’s all right,” Dr. Miller said, speaking soothingly. “Forgiving yourself is going to take time and effort, but I think that may be more important than anything else. I want you to do this exercise once a day, everyday. You can skip the people who you don’t feel ready to confront, like yourself, or save them for the end. Try. I want you to write down how you feel with each person, anything that stands out, and I want you to genuinely work your way toward confronting yourself. OK?”

Kai sighed, but he nodded. Tired, defeated.

“I also want you to start thinking about characteristics you think of when you imagine a ‘good’ mother or father. People you might know, in real life or in fiction, that you think of in these roles.”

“I smell another exercise,” Kai said wearily, but with a faint sly smile. Perhaps, as difficult as the exercise was, it had helped him as she’d hoped it would.

“Yes, but that’s for another day. I just want you to start thinking about these things. If you could have a genie grant your wish for parents, what would they be like? They don’t need to be ‘perfect,’ because no one is. Just give it some thought.”

Kai let out a long breath. “Thank you, Dr. Miller. I feel . . . I don’t want to say ‘better,’ but . . .” Kai passed his hand over his face. “More hopeful, I guess? A little less lost.”

Dr. Miller smiled, relieved. “That’s good to hear. Use the Xanax, and even rubber bands or other distractions for your hands if you need them. Let Jon support you. If your self-harming urges become overwhelming, you can call me. But I’d still like to see you again tomorrow morning.”

“Re flies in tomorrow afternoon.”

“How does that make you feel?”

“Scared. Confused.” Kai shoved his hair off his forehead. “I want to see her so badly, but at the same time, I’m afraid. It’s not even so much about her seeing the crazy

part of me, though that's part of it. It's . . ." Kai cradled his face in his hand. "I'm not ready to tell her about my aunt. I'm not sure if I'll ever be ready. And how do I explain the past day without it?"

It was a very valid point, but she was happy to see Kai being so self aware. That he was beginning to recognize, and even want (though that was probably too strong a word) to let Renee into this final major corner of his life. "Why don't you give that some thought, too. Talk with Jon about it, if you feel comfortable. And we can try some role playing tomorrow, which might help."

Kai had been so worn down by the combination of drugs and psychological exhaustion that once Jon helped him into bed, he fell asleep before he'd even finished the albuterol treatment Jon had given him to ease his breathing, which was a little wheezy (presumably from a combination of tears, drugs, and too much lying still). Still, it was good to see his brother relatively peaceful.

Secure that Kai would be asleep for awhile, Jon went out to the kitchen to test his blood and call Vicky. Dr. Miller had explained her treatment plan and what Jon should expect, and though Jon was apologetic about interrupting her holiday (since she wanted to see Kai again in the morning), she'd simply laughed. "*If I wanted to work Monday through Friday, 9-5, with no interruptions, I would have gone into dermatology,*" she'd explained, knowing that Jon, as a critical-care doc, could certainly understand. Still, Jon had thanked her for working with Kai, and for being willing to take their calls if things got dicey. He'd also assured her he'd put Kai's meds out of his reach, since anything taken in a high enough dose could be lethal.

God, he was tired.

"Here's Jonny," Vicky said jokingly when she answered, doing her best Ed McMahon impression. She knew he hated being called 'Jonny' even more than he hated 'Jonathan,' but a little teasing from her felt wonderful right now.

"Hey, Vic. Sorry I couldn't call you sooner." He'd planned to call her during Kai's session with Dr. Miller, but had found himself engrossed in a book about adults who were abused as children. He'd intended to skim it initially for anything that might give him more insight into helping Kai, but had been surprised to see himself in some of the characteristics in the book. He'd never really seen his childhood with his parents as "abusive," but both their parents were definitely absent in one way or another, and Jon had been forced to realize a lot of his personality—his nearly obsessive drive to succeed in school and work, his instinctive need to help others, his guilt when he failed—probably all tied back to the fact that he'd been taking care of himself and his mother years before Kai came along. It also forced him to realize, more than ever, that Vicky was the only person he'd ever truly let into his life. No wonder Jenny wouldn't marry him.

"It's all right. How's Kai?"

Jon sighed. "Doing a little better today, but I'm not counting my chickens just yet."

"Can I come over? My mom insisted I bring a bunch of food to give you, and I'm sure you'd prefer not having to worry about what you're going to eat for at least a couple days. Plus, you left most of your insulin at my house, right?"

"That's actually perfect. I need you to pick up a few things for me."

The door had barely closed behind Vicky when Jon was pushing her against it, burying his tongue in her mouth, pressing against her, kissing her hungrily, desperately, as if he

were drowning and she was air. She dropped the packages she'd been holding and wrapped her arms around him, smoothing her palms along his back and melting into the kiss, letting him take what he needed.

Finally, after several minutes, he pulled back, resting his forehead against hers, breathing heavily. He mumbled a few syllables several times, as if trying to speak and unable to find the words. Gently, she pushed against his chest to create enough space between them so she could see his eyes.

He had deep purple bags beneath each that seemed more pronounced since the last time she'd seen him, but what really struck her was how troubled he looked, like a war was going on behind his eyes.

She cradled his cheek, feeling a day's worth of stubble. "Is Kai that bad?"

He laughed harshly, a short sound, almost a cough, a shade of a smile trying to push up the edges of his mouth. But then he shook his head, and a shadow crossed over his face, his breath hitching, saying nothing.

Vicky kissed his cheek, sliding her hand down to cup his neck. "It's not your fault."

Jon blinked, and she saw now his eyes were a little surprised, but glossy, as if tears were threatening to spill out. "I . . ." But he couldn't seem to speak now, either, shaking his head more intently, lowering it to hide his eyes.

"None of this is your fault," Vicky repeated, more firmly, tugging him close and pulling him into a tight hug.

"This wouldn't have happened to Kai if I had been there for him twelve years ago. If I hadn't said those horrible things to him Tuesday."

Vicky kissed his neck. "That's not true, Jon. Kai isn't so fragile that he can't take a few angry words."

Jon let out a long, harsh breath. She saw fear in his eyes now, like she hadn't seen in a long time. "I . . ." He hesitated, shook his head again. "I shouldn't have let you come over. I shouldn't talk to you about this. It's not my place."

Vicky smoothed Jon's cheek. "It's all right."

Jon crossed the room, sinking down into one of the dining chairs, angled so he could just see into his opened doorway. Vicky could barely make out a figure asleep in Jon's bed, assuming it had to be Kai. It was strange for Kai to be in Jon's room instead of his own, but she said nothing, pulling a chair up beside Jon instead, gripping his hands.

"Kai pretends that he's fine, that nothing bothers him, but that's so far from the truth," Jon said in a pained voice. "He wanted to hurt himself," Jon said, his eyes vacant. "Maybe even kill himself." Jon swallowed hard. "If I hadn't been around . . . he may have tried."

Vicky worked her fingers into Jon's hair. She knew Kai had been having some problems, but she hadn't realized he was so depressed. "Why isn't he in the hospital? Couldn't they help him?"

"He's afraid of being confined, being alone. I couldn't do that to him." Jon shook his head, pushed himself back to his feet, and leaned in his bedroom doorway, watching over his brother.

Vicky approached, standing beside him. Kai looked like he was out cold, heavily sedated, she suspected.

"He's worried about losing me. When the baby comes."

Vicky's hand had been smoothing the small of Jon's back, but the words made her still. "You told him?"

“Secrets are his thing, not mine. You know that, Vic. Besides—”

She leaned her head against his shoulder. “If anyone can keep a secret, it’s Kai.”

“You’re not mad?” Jon wrapped an arm around her, holding her close, though his eyes never moved from his vigil.

She sighed. “I won’t lie and say I wouldn’t love you all to myself,” she said with a faint chuckle, “but I don’t want to be a wedge between you two.”

Jon squeezed Vicky tightly. “I know he’s an adult, but . . . I don’t know if he can really live alone. Between his physical and his mental health . . .”

“You’d be worrying about him constantly,” Vicky finished for him.

Jon sighed heavily. “I’ve never seen him like this. So . . . broken down, like everything he’d been keeping shored up all these years has finally burst through. I’m so fucking scared, Vic. What if we got through all the transplant and MLS shit and I lose him to an overdose?”

Vicky’s heart broke to hear the anguish in Jon’s voice, so she gently tugged him, guiding him to turn subtly toward her. “These past few days have made me realize how wrong I was.”

Jon’s eyebrows furrowed, looking panicked. “Vic—”

She held up a finger to his lips, shaking her head. “Wrong, making you promise you’d always put me and the baby first.” She sighed, glanced toward the bedroom. “If something happened to me, I’d have scores of relatives in line to help me. I’d have to use some of them to guard the door to keep the rest of them from assaulting me. Even when I lost . . . Andrew, even though some were hostile, I still had others who supported me. I always had somewhere to go.” She reached up and cradled Jon’s cheek. He leaned into her touch, his eyes falling half closed, but only for a moment so he wouldn’t keep Kai out of his sight too long. “Kai doesn’t have anyone else. And I know if you needed him, he’d be there for you in a heartbeat, no questions asked.” She tucked a few stray hairs behind his ear. “I love you. And part of what makes me love you so much is how much you care about other people. I wouldn’t want to change that, even if it means ‘plans’ is a word we have to put in perpetual quotation marks.” Vicky guided him into a kiss that was chaste but passionate.

“I love you,” Jon whispered. “I don’t know what I would have done without you all these years.”

Vicky smiled against his lips, but before she could say anything, she heard moaning, making them both turn their heads.

Kai was still sleeping, but obviously having nightmares, muttering and crying.

“We’ll talk later. I’ll make you a plate before I go,” Vicky said, squeezing Jon’s hand.

“Actually. . . . You brought the supplies and meds I asked you to pick up?”

Vicky nodded.

“Could you put in the IV cath? I trust you better than me not to mutilate him.” Jon frowned.

Vicky smiled faintly. “Sure.” Just before she turned to grab the materials she needed from where she’d left them by the front door, she added, “You know my house is a single story, right? And I have two extra bedrooms. One for the nursery, and . . .”

Jon’s attention jerked away from Kai for a moment to meet Vicky’s eyes. “Are you saying what I think you’re saying?”

“It’d take some modifications, especially to one of the bathrooms, but I have a cousin who’s a contractor, so it wouldn’t be too expensive.”

“Vicky?” Jon’s eyes glistened with hope, mixed, paradoxically, with uncertainty.

“It sounds like a recipe for a bad sitcom, I know, but . . .” She smiled. “Kai’s good with kids, right? And as much as we both work, it might be nice having someone to help us with the baby.”

Jon squeezed Vicky suddenly and so tightly she struggled to breathe, but it was a quick embrace, as he soon pushed her back, gripping her shoulders. “Are you sure?”

Vicky shrugged. “Two Taylors for the price of one? Three, if I count the baby? Maybe I should forget the sitcom and go straight to the screenplay.”

Jon blinked rapidly. “You are the best thing that’s ever happened to me. I don’t know how I didn’t see it sooner.”

Vicky laughed. “It’s not entirely your fault. I held back for a long time.” She sighed, kissed his chest before stepping back to meet his eyes. “Especially that last year before Kai’s transplant. . . . There were so many times you’d come to me in my office, needing support and encouragement . . . and I wanted to kiss you.”

“Really?”

Vicky nodded. “But I knew how much you needed a friend, someone to help you get through it all, especially if . . . well, if he hadn’t made it.” Vicky swallowed. “I didn’t want to risk destroying that friendship no matter how much I wanted to taste your lips against mine. I could wait, if that’s what you needed.”

For a moment, Jon’s eyes grew wide, glassy, and he blinked even more furiously than he had earlier. He pulled Vicky’s face close, kissing her forehead, then her nose, then her mouth, briefly but deeply. “I love you, Vicky. I don’t know if I could ever get tired of saying that.”

Kai’s return to consciousness felt like a diver slowly rising up through murky water. Floaty, disconnected, his first attempt to open his eyes revealing a blurry, confusing landscape. His chest felt strange, tight, like he needed to cough, and nausea swirled in his stomach. His brain still wouldn’t quite click on, so he pushed himself up with wobbling arms, the room swaying around him, bile rising in the back of his throat. He felt a sharp pain in one of his wrists, but he ignored it for now, as confusion and his stomach battled for his attention.

Upright, the urge to cough grew, so he forced himself, the coughs quickly taking over, becoming more intense, turning into dry heaves as his stomach joined the fray, desperate to empty. He heaved a few more times, but nothing came up, leaving him even more dizzy and sick than before. He held himself, bent over, swaying, not entirely sure where he was or why he felt the way he did, his mind functioning only enough to tell him to stay as still as possible and maybe the nausea would pass.

Even with his eyes closed, he felt like he was being buoyed by waves, and he wondered if he’d pass out again.

“Kai?”

Vaguely, Kai heard his name, but he was so focused on just sitting still, on not throwing up, he had trouble focusing. Every time he tried to follow another thought, the nausea would surge and he’d have to abandon it.

“Kai, can you hear me?”

Go away, Kai thought vaguely as the urge to cough surged. He tried to resist, but finally had to give in, coughing, coughing, coughing, then dry heaving twice. His vision went sparkly.

Hands were pushing him down, and he tried to resist at first, but the nausea

was so strong, his mind so muddled, he couldn't fight it. The same hands rolled him onto his side. Wait. What? He tried to say something, but forming words was too complicated right now.

Kai struggled to lift his eyes to see, and saw a face. A man. Blond. Worried look. He was familiar. Kai's limbs felt heavy.

Kai tried to lift a hand to him, as if to check to see if he were real, and something pulled in his wrist, making him hiss. Then he saw it, the IV line. Panic surged. What had he been drugged with? Where was he?

The man put a firm hand around Kai's wrist, and Kai tried to pull away, but the drugs were making him weak, and after a few feeble attempts at struggling, he sagged into the bed.

"Shh, Kai. You're all right. It's just saline and glucose."

Kai squinted, trying to focus his vision, but the man was just a blur. His head was spinning, so he shut his eyes again.

"You hardly ate yesterday, you didn't eat today, and what you did eat, you threw up. I didn't want your blood pressure or sugar to drop."

Concentrating hard, he managed to understand what the man was saying, but it was like listening to a foreign language that he knew, but not well.

The man smoothed his forehead in a way that he found comforting despite not clearly comprehending where he was or what was going on. "How bad is your nausea? I can give you some Phenergan, but you're still a little out of it from the benzodiazepines, so I'd prefer not to add another sedative if I don't have to."

Kai's brow furrowed. That was a lot of words, and he heard them all, but he wasn't entirely sure he could say what they all meant. He managed to bring his hand to his chin, ignoring the pull of the IV. "*What's wrong with me?*" he asked with one sign.

He heard the man sigh. "The Xanax really knocked you out. You'll be OK. Why don't you try to sleep?"

Kai shook his head. The nausea had eased a little, but it still hovered, preventing him from riding the drugs back into oblivion. And at the same time, a wariness itched in his brain, warning him to fight through the fog. "*Who are you?*"

Kai saw the man frown deeply. "Jon, Kai. Your brother."

Kai shook his head. "*MY BROTHER LEAVE. HE ABANDON ME,*" Kai signed sloppily. "*Are you a doctor?*" Kai's eyes focused a little better, and he could see more of the room. It looked like a bedroom, not a hospital room, but maybe he'd been sent to another institution? He struggled to remember, but his mind was impenetrable.

The man's frown grew even more pronounced. "Kai, how old are you?"

Kai touched his chin, then wagged his fist, thumb up. "*TEN.*"

The man sighed. Apparently, that was the wrong answer. But how else was he supposed to respond? Maybe this was another one of those head doctors. P-something. He'd seen quite a few of them, but mostly without interpreters, so he had to focus on their English, which was hard, and they didn't understand his signing, which was harder. So they usually dismissed him as being stupid and simple. But this doctor seemed to understand him.

"*I'm confused.*"

The man sighed again, went back to stroking Kai's forehead, which felt so nice. "I think all the drugs have finally gotten to you."

A flash of fear flared up, but Kai's body would hardly respond. He vaguely remembered a doctor trying to put something in his nose, down his throat. Pain. "*Are*

you the one who hurt me?"

"No, Kai, no," the man said, still smoothing Kai's head. No one ever touched him like this. It felt nice. It reminded him of his brother, before, the way he'd do that when Kai was having trouble breathing, sleeping. Or when his pain was bad.

Kai felt his eyes welling up with tears that spilled out, and vaguely, part of his mind screamed that he wasn't supposed to cry, that he needed to stop it, because he'd be punished, but he couldn't.

"It's all right, Kai. You're safe. I won't let anyone hurt you."

Kai blinked, looked up again. The man still wasn't in clear focus. "*Dr. Fox?*" That had to be who the man was. He was the only one who hadn't hurt him, who had been kind to him, who had made the bad doctor who tried to put the tube in his nose go away. Who had known a little sign language when no one else did.

"No, it's Jon. Your brother. It's 2000, not 1988. Come on. Snap out of it." The man, Dr. Fox?, was growing angry, which frightened Kai. When adults got angry, bad things happened. His words weren't making any sense. His brother was gone. David and Kai had determined that already. Why was Dr. Fox being mean like this, trying to trick him?

Kai covered his face with one hand, a reflexive, defensive posture, feeling himself beginning to shake subtly.

But the man walked away, leaving Kai alone. Something wasn't right, he knew it, deep in the back of his mind, but he couldn't quite shake off the confusion. He touched his nose, again making sure there wasn't a tube in it, feeling tired, but too nervous to sleep. He remembered, vaguely, Dr. Fox gave him a stuffed fox to play with and hold. He had leaned in and told Kai it was their secret, but that Kai could keep it. Since Kai had lost his parents and his brother, no one gave him anything. And the stuffed fox was so soft, and it had a little smile, and it made everything a little less scary.

The man—Dr. Fox?—came back, and Kai waved to get his attention. "*Where's my toy?*"

The man frowned, looking confused. He had a cup in one hand, but nothing else scary. Maybe he hadn't understood Kai?

"*Please, can I have my toy back?*"

The man looked sad. Maybe he knew someone had taken the toy, and he didn't have another one. Maybe he would be mad that Kai had lost it, even though Kai couldn't remember losing it. Someone—one of the nurses, or maybe that mean doctor—must have taken it while he was sleeping.

"*I'm sorry,*" Kai signed, tears leaking again, though he struggled to hold them back.

"It's OK," the man said, his voice friendly and soft, taking one of Kai's hands gently in his. "Here." He put something cold in Kai's hand, closing his fingers on it, holding it there. Kai tried to pull away, but the man was stronger.

Kai let out a scared noise that in some part of his mind seemed wrong.

"Shh, Kai. It's me, Jon. Your brother. You're here, with me, in my room. You're twenty-two, not ten. No one is going to hurt you. You're safe."

The ice was almost painfully cold, and as Kai focused on their hands, the cube already melting, his eyes seemed to focus better, something shifting in his brain. "Jon?"

Jon let out a long whooshing breath. "You back with us?"

Kai's brows furrowed. Jon released his hand, which was wet and cold, and Kai realized his wrist hurt, and he lifted it, seeing an IV catheter taped to it, with a couple

lines springing out from its ports. But this was definitely Jon's room. He felt like he'd just woken up from a dream, but he couldn't remember the details, and every time he grasped for them, they slipped away even more.

Kai blinked slowly, keeping his eyes closed for a few seconds each time, hoping that when he opened them, he'd feel less . . . weird. It didn't work. Absently, because he felt like maybe it had been part of his dream somehow, he touched his nose, genuinely surprised he didn't find a feeding tube coming out of it. He couldn't quite seem to put anything together. A remote part of his brain told him he should be in pain, that he should have that feeding tube in his nose, that he should be scared, and part of him was scared, but. . . .

"Nothing makes sense," Kai muttered. His voice didn't sound right, either, his words slurred and barely intelligible.

"You're confused from the drugs and low blood pressure," Jon assured him, smoothing his forehead again. Kai really liked that. It was so comforting, and for a moment he could forget his confusion and uncertainty and just sink into that touch. "You'll be OK."

For several moments, Kai just lay there, not trying to think, just focusing on the feel of his brother's hand against his skin, the sound of Jon's words assuring him he was safe.

"You feel any better?" Jon asked after several minutes in which Kai may have dozed off and on.

"Yeah," Kai said. His voice was rough, but not so slurred.

"Who's Dr. Fox?"

Kai's eyebrows dipped. "What?"

"You thought I was him."

"When?" Kai tried to push himself up, but the dizziness swarmed him, and he fell back.

"Easy," Jon soothed. "I think, with the disorientation from the drugs, it was like you were caught in another kind of flashback. You thought you were ten and I was Dr. Fox."

Kai frowned. He'd never told anyone about him, ever. "Most doctors were cruel to me back then," Kai admitted. "I was labeled 'nonverbal,' which you know is doctor-speak for 'too retarded to comprehend anything.'"

"Kai . . ."

Kai sighed, grateful he was starting to feel more like himself, and as long as he lay still, the nausea and dizziness subsided. "Because I couldn't speak, many doctors, and even nurses, treated me like I couldn't understand what was happening, like I couldn't feel pain." Jon started smoothing his forehead again, and Kai let his eyes fall closed. "That was before Dr. J. Before even Dr. MacDonald. . . . After . . . that summer, I was in bad shape. I don't remember it too well, but I was really malnourished and I had a lot of problems eating. . . ." Kai hesitated. Tried to recall how much he or Dr. Miller had told Jon, and decided to keep things vague. "So they decided to put in an NG tube. . . . But the first doctor who tried . . . he didn't tell me what they were going to do. He didn't give me any kind of local, and I guess I was in too bad a state to give me a general. . . ." Kai felt his sinuses prickling at the memory of how much that had hurt, how terrified he'd been, especially coming from his aunt and not fully understanding what had happened, convinced he had been really, really bad and was being punished.

"Jesus, Kai," Jon said, squeezing Kai's hand. "How could anyone do a

procedure like that on a kid without trying to explain it or use any kind of anesthetic?” Kai could hear anger in his brother’s voice. “My fourth year of medical school, during one of my rotations, we had to practice inserting nasogastric tubes on each other. Those fucking hurt, especially if the patient isn’t cooperative. Or if you don’t lube it properly. Dammit, Kai. I’m sorry.”

Kai shook his head. “At first, I tried to be good, because I thought I was being punished and I’d make it worse.”

“Jesus.”

Kai frowned. “But my gag reflex kicked in, violently.” Kai cringed. “If you think one of those is bad going in, especially without any kind of anesthetic, it’s even worse when you throw it back up. Imagine the worst thing you’ve ever accidentally snorted out your nose while eating and magnify it times a thousand.” Kai opened his eyes and looked up at Jon, who had put a hand to his nose reflexively.

“You must have been terrified.”

Kai sighed. Nodded. “I couldn’t scream, but when he wanted to try again, I fought him as well as I could. He got annoyed enough he called for help, and that ended up being Dr. Fox.” Kai smiled faintly. “He was so kind to me, calming me down and insisting everything was all right. That I wasn’t bad.”

Kai closed his eyes, remembering. He couldn’t really recall what Dr. Fox looked like; it was like a dream, where some details stuck out while others remained hazy. He remembered a friendly smile, dirty-blond hair, and a deep voice that was soothing instead of frightening. Kai recalled Dr. Fox trying to see how much Kai understood, using props and cards with different colors to try to get Kai to tell him how bad his pain was. How he was patient and spoke slowly and clearly, but not in a patronizing way; rather, the rich timbre of his voice was calming, assuring Kai he wasn’t bad and he didn’t need to be scared, and that Dr. Fox would make it better.

“He kept calling me Joseph, and so I signed that my name was Kai, and . . . it turned out he knew the alphabet and a few signs. He realized that not only could I understand, but I could communicate.” Kai wiped his eyes, rubbing them with the side of his hand. “He gave me this little stuffed fox, and told me to hug it whenever I got scared, and it would take the scary away.” Kai squeezed his eyes to try to stop the tears that had started. “He made things better, if only a little. I guess he was a resident. I didn’t see him again after that hospital stay.” Kai took in a deep breath. “After what happened, I couldn’t be Joseph Taylor anymore.” Kai looked up at Jon through blurred vision, hoping his brother wouldn’t ask for more of an explanation. Kai was certain Jon didn’t know it was their aunt who had hurt him, and even though she was long dead, he didn’t like to add any more guilt to Jon’s shoulders if he could help it.

“So you changed your name to Fox. Because of him.”

Kai nodded.

Jon blew air out his nose, smoothing Kai’s hair. “What happened to the little stuffed toy? You were asking about it, earlier, when you were out of it.”

Kai was surprised to find his mouth dipping into a deeper frown, and fresh tears wanting to form. “One of the nurses took it. She said it was unsanitary and it was going to exacerbate my asthma. I think she actually literally said, ‘exacerbate,’ because she assumed I didn’t understand her anyway.” Kai sighed, felt his body relaxing, like telling Jon about Dr. Fox had lifted some burden he didn’t even know he’d been carrying, or maybe it was some kind of second wind from the sedatives in his blood. “I wouldn’t have been allowed to keep it at County House, anyway. We weren’t permitted

personal possessions. CH was very communal. Plus, you know stuffed toys are bad for kids with breathing problems, especially if they have a trache.” Kai yawned, stretched, felt the IV pull, and hissed. Nausea still hovered in his belly, and he rubbed his stomach absently.

“Still nauseous?”

Kai nodded, trying not to think about it; thinking about it always made it worse.

Kai felt Jon’s hands pull his pants down, wipe his skin on his hip, then a quick prick of a needle. “Phenergan. A low dose. It’ll help you feel better and let you rest.” Jon tucked the blankets back up, making Kai feel warm and secure.

“Jon?”

“Yes?”

“I’ve never told anyone about Dr. Fox. . . . Not even David. OK?”

Jon swept some of Kai’s hair off his face. “It’ll be our secret,” Jon said, and Kai could hear the faint smile in his voice.

Kai focused on the gentle sweep of his brother’s hand against his skin and hair, let the soft, deep timbre of his brother’s voice assuring him he was safe and that everything would be OK lull him back to sleep.

Kai would have had no idea of the time if it weren’t for the large digital clock across the room from Jon’s bed, which informed him it was late afternoon. He’d been in and out of consciousness most of the day, and though he’d had a few “mini flashbacks,” he’d been relatively OK once he came back to himself. Right now he was sitting up in Jon’s bed, propped up with pillows, trying to will away the nausea in his stomach; Jon had offered him Zofran this time, which wouldn’t sedate him, in the hopes that he might be able to finally eat something.

He still had the IV in his wrist, which was taped thoroughly to make it difficult for Kai to pull it out if the urge to hurt himself came over him. He had to admit, though, he hadn’t thought about it, not really, since the morning. Maybe it was the Xanax, which worked spectacularly well—he could see why people took it recreationally. If it weren’t for the fact that it left him incredibly nauseated, he could see himself abusing it, too. But really, if he thought about it, it might have just been having Jon around, taking care of him without being his often overbearing, worrying self. Kai still couldn’t believe he had told Jon about Dr. Fox—benzos in high doses did make him more prone to confessions. It felt like a dream, but then a lot of the past couple days did, thanks to insanity and drugs.

Jon poked his head in. He had been reluctant to leave Kai alone, even for a few minutes, but Kai had promised he’d shout if he felt he was losing control over himself. Of course, the flaw in that plan was if he literally lost himself in a major flashback, then he wouldn’t be aware enough to warn Jon before he potentially hurt himself, but Kai wasn’t about to point that out. He appreciated Jon, but he didn’t need his brother watching him like a security camera every single second.

“David’s here. He came to drop off your car, but he’d like to talk to you, if you’re up to it.”

Kai pushed some hair out of his face, feeling how oily it was and frowning before he could stop himself. Jon hadn’t brought up a shower again yet, and honestly, thinking of the bathroom made his stomach clench, but he’d need to bathe at some point. “Yeah, I can talk for a few minutes.”

Jon turned around in the door, and Kai could see his shoulders working as he signed, though it was impossible to know what he was saying from the angle. A minute later, David came striding in, his face neutral but his eyes looking at Kai with wary concern.

David perched on the edge of the bed, facing Kai. He spotted the IV bags, which Jon had managed to hang off a hook on the wall. His eyebrows furrowed, but he said nothing, bringing his attention full on to Kai. *“How you doing?”* he asked with one sign, a casual flick of his middle finger off his shoulder.

Kai shrugged. *“Haven’t killed myself yet,”* Kai said with a wry smile, grateful he could sign that all with one hand; the cath in his wrist hurt.

David rolled his eyes. *“You know, if you hated Megan’s food so much, you didn’t need to make up such a complicated story to get out of it.”*

Kai was surprised when a bark of laughter escaped his lips, but then he frowned as the memory of throwing up Megan’s Thanksgiving dinner flared at the back of his mouth, and nausea surged. He grimaced. *“Please. No food talk.”*

David frowned, but nodded. *“Look. I know I said I wasn’t going to risk my ass, but I found the records you wanted. It wasn’t simple.”* David looked at Kai with a “you owe me” glare. *“I left them in your car, so you can look at them when you’re better.”* David scratched his nose, a nervous habit that signaled he was uncomfortable. *“I won’t tell you what to do, but sometimes ignorance is bliss, OK? I’d rather not know about my father. Maybe he ended up driving his car into a tree a year after he gave me up; maybe he married some rich woman and lives in the lap of luxury with six ‘normal’ kids who he doesn’t slap around. Either way, I’d rather not know. Get it?”*

Kai nodded, but there was no way he was going to pass up a chance to learn more about his mother, and by extension, himself. *“Did you read the files?”*

David looked offended. *“No. Just a quick glance here and there to make sure they were the right ones. I figured it wasn’t any of my business.”*

Kai raised a single eyebrow in surprise, but nodded.

David deftly changed the subject. *“So, how fucked up are you?”* David signed it jokingly—his middle finger on his temple then shifting upward into a thumbs up—but his eyes revealed genuine concern.

Kai sighed, picked at the medical tape securing the IV to his wrist. Not really trying to take it off, but just giving his fingers something to do while he decided how to answer. Finally, he lifted his good hand and replied, *“Pretty fucked up.”* He tried for a wry smile, but didn’t quite succeed.

David nodded, signaling he understood and Kai didn’t have to elaborate. *“I know you have Jon, but if you need anything . . .”*

Kai smiled. *“I have been thinking of robbing the First Bank of Jonesville . . .”*

David growled and punched Kai in the arm. *“Anything, as long as it won’t get me arrested, asshole.”*

Kai grinned, held out his hand, and David accepted it, pulling himself toward Kai for a hug.

“If you are ever feeling alone, text me, OK?” David said, once he’d pulled back, his face the most serious it had been since he’d arrived, conveying that he meant much more than the few signs did on the surface. *“Any day. Any time. You know I won’t ask questions.”*

Kai felt tears springing up again. Dammit. He’d probably cried more in the past three months than he had in his previous 20+ years. He hurriedly wiped his eyes, sucked

in a breath, and nodded enthusiastically. He felt David's hand squeeze his shoulder, pat his cheek, then the bed shift. When Kai looked up, finally managing to regain some semblance of control, David was gone.

Kai was still fighting nausea, despite the Zofran, and he was beginning to feel restless and irritable, sweat breaking out on his forehead and back even though he was chilled. He threw the book he'd been trying to read across the room; focusing on the text only made the nausea worse.

Jon came rushing in just as Kai was trying to see if he could pull the tape off his wrist without unwinding it. "Kai, calm down," Jon said, putting his hands on Kai to still him. He glanced at the clock, then at Kai's eyes. "Guess it's time for more drugs."

"I'm fucking sick of being drugged," Kai said, pushing against Jon, making his brother stumble, though he didn't release his hold.

"I'd normally say it's way too early for you to be having withdrawals, but nothing surprises me with you." Jon yanked the collar of Kai's T-shirt over his shoulder, exposing skin, which he wiped quickly with an alcohol swab before injecting him. "Valium. Hoping to get you weaned off it soon though," he said, capping the syringe. He felt Kai's forehead, frowned, but said nothing else. Instead, he handed Kai his cell phone. "Renee's been texting and calling you since yesterday. I think you should talk to her."

"And what the fuck am I supposed to tell her?"

Jon had crossed to his closet, which he opened, reaching up for one of the Ziploc bags of meds he'd stashed there as a precaution, probably while Kai was sleeping. He turned to face Kai as he dug through the bag. "I don't know. You're a better liar than me."

Kai glared at Jon as he used his good hand to scroll through his missed calls, voicemail notifications, and text messages. Jon was right: Renee was worried that he hadn't communicated with her since Thursday morning. A pang of guilt hit him, shortly followed by a flash of inspiration. He could tell her about running into Nikki, and make up a story about giving into temptation and sleeping with her. Considering how big a deal it had been for Renee to trust Kai like that, certainly that would get her to hate him enough she'd never want to see him again. He'd keep his secrets, and he'd protect her (and himself) from inevitable future catastrophe.

But Kai had promised Renee he wouldn't hurt her, and even if it was hurting her to prevent a bigger pain, Kai couldn't do it. In fact, the idea that he'd even thought of it made him so disgusted with himself. . . .

Jon was distracted; apparently the first bag hadn't had the drugs he was looking for. Kai had enough strength, even with the muscle relaxant, which was beginning to hit his blood as a subtle wave throughout his body, to rip out the IV cath, if he was determined enough.

"Fuck," Kai said, his voice foreign sounding.

Jon immediately dropped what he was doing, obviously hearing the frustrated anguish in his brother's voice. "Kai . . . ?"

Kai was breathing heavily, the dose of Valium Jon had injected him with not enough to really affect him, since it was primarily to prevent withdrawal. "Talk me down. Talk me down," Kai muttered frantically, pressing on the point where the needle entered his skin, the jolt of pain shooting down into his hand and up toward his elbow.

Jon's eyes widened, but he sank onto the bed, grabbing Kai's hands and

holding them tightly, as much for reassurance as to assure Kai wouldn't do anything stupid with them. "Talk to me."

Kai squeezed his eyes tight, clenched his teeth, trying to will the negative thoughts away. "Why are you here?"

Kai's question seemed to catch Jon by surprise. "What? What do you mean?"

Kai opened his eyes. "I mean, why are you giving up your time with Vicky to make sure I don't kill myself? Why do you care about me?"

Jon looked at Kai like he was crazy, which, despite Dr. Miller's insistence, he knew he was. "Because you're my brother. And you need me."

"Even after everything bad I've done? Even though I lied to you about my breathing? Even though the committee is going to vote against you?"

Jon sighed. "Kai, we went over this already. It's fine. I forgive you, and the committee isn't your fault. Let me finish getting you some Xanax, OK?"

Kai shook his head. "I'm so fucking worthless," he said, trying to pull his hands away. He wanted to tuck his legs up, bury his face in his knees, scream into them until he lost his voice, but Jon wouldn't let go. "I promised Re I wouldn't hurt her. She told me I make her feel safe. She trusts me. But I will hurt her, Jon. You're right; I am selfish."

"Kai—"

"I am," Kai shouted, realizing he was hysterical but not able to control himself. "I am. Because a part of me would rather rip her heart out right now than risk subjecting her to this." Kai broke down into sobs that were more jerks of his chest than true tears, like his body was battling itself as much as his mind was. He felt like tearing himself apart, like the momentary lull he'd experienced earlier had been nothing but a hallucinatory dream.

This was his new reality.

Kai didn't even notice that Jon had released his hands, since time seemed to have disappeared. He was trapped in this out-of-control world in which he was too chickenshit to talk to the woman he loved, where he'd rather hurt her to protect himself than tell her the truth. And knowing that about himself made his self-loathing grow exponentially.

If he was quick, he could yank out the cath; the needle would be small, but if he jabbed with enough force in just the right spot. . . .

"Jon," Kai said desperately.

"Here," Jon said, practically shoving pills into Kai's mouth with one hand while he secured Kai's wrists with his other. "Swallow." Jon's tone was uncharacteristically commanding.

Kai dry swallowed, the pills wanting to stick to his tongue. He wished they worked instantly; his pulse was racing in his throat, his mind was spinning with all kinds of conflicting thoughts, and above it all, he still wanted to hurt himself. As if doing so would somehow release the negativity and insanity like water leaking from a spigot.

"Kai," Jon said, holding Kai's head to force him to make eye contact. "You are not worthless. You are not unlovable. I care about you. David cares about you. Renee cares about you. Repeat after me, 'I am not worthless. I am not unlovable. People care about me.'"

"And I'm good enough and smart enough and doggone it, people like me?" Kai snapped. He'd never seen SNL growing up, but Jake had been a huge fan and quoted from the show all the time. Kai was so, so angry, mostly at himself, but really, it was just

more emotion raging out of control, with no real rhyme or reason anymore. “Dammit, dammit, dammit,” Kai said, reaching up to try to beat his fists against his head, as if that would make everything just stop.

Jon gripped his forearms, pulling them away and pushing Kai down on the bed. The position made Kai’s already racing pulse spike until it was almost all he could hear, thundering in his ears. “Kai. Calm down. Close your eyes. Focus on your breathing, OK? I don’t want you to think about anything else except that.” Jon released one of Kai’s arms, the one with the IV, and laid his hand on Kai’s chest as he guided him through slow, measured breathing.

Kai’s mind kept trying to scream at him how useless he was, tried to remind him of what a fuck up he was, of all the people he’d hurt or disappointed in his life. A mockery of the Circle of Forgiveness from the exercise Dr. Miller had guided him through earlier. (Which felt like forever ago.) A ring of people, some not even clear faces, circling him and shouting epithets: *disgusting, worthless, retard, selfish, freak.*

Darkness. Those words, muffled, coming through a locked bathroom door.

Then, suddenly, his perspective shifted and he felt the cold, hard metal of a locker up against his back, his arms pinned as they were held out at his sides, crucifixion style.

“They shouldn’t allow retards and freaks in this school,” Jeremy said. The high school bully still had bruising around his healing broken nose and glared at Kai with killer eyes full of loathing.

“Then what are you doing here, asshole?” Kai spoke the words slowly, proud he got the English right and the pronunciation clear on the first try despite the fact that he was struggling to breathe, on the brink of an asthma attack, the position not doing him any favors.

The first punch to his gut snapped him back to reality.

Sort of.

“Don’t touch me! Don’t fucking touch me!” Kai screamed, jerking violently away from Jon.

He heard a crash and a curse.

Kai was breathing heavily, his eyes wild, searching the room, trying to figure out where he was. Not the bathroom. Not the high school. . . . Jon’s room. Jon’s room, he reminded himself as he pulled his legs toward his chest. He was shaking now, practically vibrating. He dipped his forehead to his knees and rocked himself, willing it all to stop. To just stop. Just stop.

“Kai. Are you there? Can you talk to me?”

Kai lifted his head and saw Jon, hovering near the bed, though he was keeping a safe distance, his hand on his face. When he dropped it, Kai could see a bruise already beginning to form on his brother’s cheek that could potentially turn into a black eye. Kai’s eyes widened, fresh tears spilled. “Oh, fuck. Oh, fuck,” he muttered as he realized he had done that. What if that had been Renee? She was so tiny. What if he was with her and he freaked out? He could hurt her. He could . . . kill her. “Oh God, Jon. I’m sorry.”

Jon didn’t say anything; he just watched Kai warily, not that Kai could blame him. The self-loathing of earlier surged until it was overwhelming, almost like a poison gas filling his lungs and cutting off his air. Kai curled up into a tight ball, using one hand to keep his legs tucked to his chest and his other to bury his head in his knees. Maybe if he willed it strongly enough, he’d disappear.

Vicky listened to the sound of the water in Jon's bathroom as he showered, taking a hesitant seat on one side of Jon's bed. Kai lay on his side, curled into the fetal position, deep in a drug-induced sleep, barely breathing, though he didn't look relaxed. His face was almost pained, his nose twitching, his eyes moving behind his lids, likely having nightmares. Despite the stubble on his cheeks, like this she was reminded how very young Kai was, almost young enough to be her son, and she couldn't help thinking of Andrew. Part of her wanted to reach up and nudge some of the sweat-drenched bangs off his forehead, but Jon had warned her not to touch Kai.

Jon had refused to go into detail, respecting Kai's privacy, but he had explained that Kai had been having some problems with his nightmares bleeding into reality, which was why Kai had attacked Jon in the first place. It's also why Jon had asked Vicky to brave the Black Friday crowds he knew she hated (even if it was a yearly tradition for many of her female cousins and a few of her sisters) to buy a strange assortment of items for Kai, to help ground him in reality.

"Kai," Vicky said in a low voice, part of her wondering if she was a coward for speaking to him while he was unconscious. But Jon had insisted it was better if she wasn't around Kai for a few days, and she'd only stayed now to give Jon a chance to shower, shave, and eat without worrying about leaving Kai unsupervised.

Vicky stretched her hand out on the bed, her fingers resting only a few inches from Kai's. "I'm sorry," she said, focused on their fingers. "I'm sorry if I'm to blame for any of this. I know how important Jon is to you, and vice versa, and I try not to be selfish with Jon, but . . ." She took in a harsh breath. "It's hard, with the baby, you know?" Vicky chuckled softly. "Of course you don't know. How could you? I just . . . I love your brother. Very much. And I want this baby. I want my own family. And I guess, for a little while I thought . . ." Vicky shook her head, rolled her eyes at herself. "It's silly, but I guess . . . I was jealous of you. I thought Jon loved you too much. That he couldn't have room in his heart for me and the baby." Vicky tucked some stray hair that had fallen out of her braid behind her ear. "But I realized love doesn't work that way. Especially for someone like Jon. The more you love, the more you can love. So I hope you won't see me as stealing Jon from you. Instead, I hope you'll see it as your family growing."

Kai's eyes opened slowly. He felt heavy, lightheaded, and utterly exhausted, but that was par for the course. Even though they kept the sedation light, at his request, and even though he was on the most leak-free trache tube they had, there was no getting around the fact that his lungs could barely keep his blood oxygenated, even with the machine endlessly puffing away for him.

Every part of him hurt, a tingling numbness from nerves angrily crying out against the lack of oxygen, and one of the doctors—Kai could hardly keep them straight anymore if it wasn't Dr. J—had explained his kidneys were precariously close to shutting down. And another, that his heart—which had always been healthy—was beginning to feel the strain of overwork. Kai had technically been dying for years, but now it was more real than ever. He was tired, and he was ready for this all to finally end, but at the same time. . . .

He was afraid.

Kai's life hadn't been terribly wonderful, and the brief moment of happiness he'd found with Becca had been shattered weeks ago. He really had nothing to live for or look forward to, and yet. . . . He was so very, very afraid.

And the worst part was he could never, would never, admit that to anyone,

including and especially Jon, and that made him feel so achingly alone.

“Hey,” a soft male voice whispered.

Kai’s head throbbed. Before he opened his eyes, he was assaulted by the strong scent of fragrant, burning wood, followed by the whine of violins. Vivaldi? Tchaikovsky? Beethoven? Jon had exposed Kai to some of the classical standards while waiting for his transplant, but he honestly couldn’t recognize a composer based on the tune, except if a particular symphony or concerto (or whatever, he didn’t know what the difference was) was familiar. He felt a large hand smoothing his arm, then placing something rough in his grip. Confused, he finally raised his lids, his vision a little blurry and hazy from the lingering drugs. He saw what looked like some kind of projection night light casting a faint pattern of rotating stars on one wall. Maybe it was the drugs, but he found himself entranced by it.

“You with me?”

Kai blinked slowly a few times before guiding his eyes toward the voice. Kai realized he lay on his side, carefully arranged, and Jon sat on the edge of the bed. He looked better than Kai remembered, a little more rested, not so haggard. He’d shaved, and probably showered, from the look of his hair, which seemed like he’d washed it but forgotten to brush it. Kai’s stomach still roiled uneasily, and he wondered if it was the smell not helping matters. His fingers brushed along the object Jon had placed in his hand. He honestly didn’t know what it was; it was almost like a scouring brush, but about a foot long, with a string on one end, and made of a softer, plastic material that stretched if he pulled on it but was rough when he rubbed it between his fingers. Again, maybe it was the drugs, but he found he liked the feel of it, the way the fibers shifted as he fiddled with it. It might be a nice prop to take to his sessions with Dr. Miller, he thought idly. His brows furrowed. How much time had passed? The clock across the room revealed the time as nearly eight, which meant he’d lost almost half a day since his last freak out. Unless . . . was it still Friday? Had he already taken his nightly meds? Everything was a blur.

“Kai?”

Kai forced himself to look at his brother again, who had turned more to face him, and this time Kai saw the redish purple bruise on his brother’s cheek. Too fresh for Kai to have lost more than a day, then. “Am I hallucinating again?”

Jon’s eyebrows quirked up, but then he seemed to realize Kai was asking about the strange objects and the scent. Incense, maybe? Kai had never actually smelled any, but he had read about it. “This is all to help keep you in reality, so no,” Jon said with a friendly smile. “It’s past time to take your meds. You up to it? I tried to wake you earlier, but you were too out of it.”

Kai had a vague memory of dreaming about his final days before his transplant, and telling Jon about Dr. Fox, of Jeremy beating him while he was pinned to the school locker, of David visiting, and Vicky’s voice telling him how much she loved Jon, though he wasn’t entirely sure what was real and what wasn’t. He managed a faint nod, and Jon helped him sit up slowly.

Kai took his inhaled medications first, coughing more than normal afterward. For a minute, while he was coughing, he had a flash of a memory: coughing violently, unable to stop, unable to breathe, while Jon tried to help him and their mother shouted at Jon to shut him up. Kai’s eyes widened, but didn’t have too long to dwell before Jon slipped something in his mouth.

“Suck on that. It’s not medicine.”

It was strongly sour, and it pulled him away from the surprise memory before turning sweet. He chewed and swallowed, looking at Jon, confused.

“Were you starting to get lost there? Did the candy help?”

Kai blinked, wondering if something in his face had showed to clue Jon in. He nodded.

“Good,” Jon said, sounding both happy and relieved. “Here.” He offered Kai several pills, all of which Kai recognized except for one.

“What is that?”

“Celexa. I talked with Dr. Miller while you were out, and we both think you should start it now.”

Kai frowned, plucking all the pills but that one and swallowing them with a few drinks of Gatorade that Jon offered him. “I’m already nauseous enough.”

Jon sighed. He looked sad. “I know, Kai. But I did some research on it while you were sleeping, and I talked to Dr. Miller again, and we both agree it could really help your anxiety, and maybe, long-term, your depression, both of which could help with your PTSD symptoms.”

Kai’s eyes furrowed angrily, but his emotions didn’t swirl out of control. He just felt hungover, dizzy and sick. “Did I hallucinate her telling me she didn’t want to start me on a drug to control my symptoms?” He thought he remembered Jon forcing him to talk to her after Kai . . . after Kai hit him, but he couldn’t be sure anything was real. He frowned deeply, the uncertainty, the inability to trust himself—in more ways than one—swirling around in his belly like an unhappy beast.

Jon sighed again, more exasperated. “No. I did call her, and you did talk to her. But that other drug will mean you have to go into the hospital since it’ll affect all your other medications and could potentially put you at risk for infection or rejection. The Celexa only affects the Zofran and the Mexitil, and it could start helping you within a few days.” At Kai’s continued scowl, Jon added, “Renee comes home tomorrow. If you don’t want to see her yet, I can keep her away for a few days on the excuse that she’s covered with germs from her trip, which, honestly, is true. If you take this now, maybe you’ll be more of yourself by the time you have to face her.” Jon pushed his hand with the pill toward Kai.

Kai’s shoulders slumped. He missed Renee so fucking much, yet at the same time was terrified of facing her, especially since he could hurt her, not only emotionally, but physically, and he hated himself for it.

Jon pushed another candy into Kai’s mouth and waited.

Focusing on the taste of the candy, on the incense, on the weird plastic loopy thing in his hand, on the music, instead of the negative thoughts helped center him, and he took a deep breath. “OK,” Kai said, accepting the pill and popping it into his mouth.

“Good,” Jon said with a strange smile, almost proud, maybe? “There’s something I wanted to talk to you about. If you aren’t ready to deal with it right now, I get it, but I’m hoping it might help you feel a little better.”

A half dozen possibilities raced through Kai’s head, though they were all negative, so he knew he wasn’t right. “OK,” he said tentatively, deciding to take a few more sips of Gatorade.

Jon carded his fingers through his hair a few times. “I know you’re nervous about Vicky’s pregnancy, and how that’ll change things between us. . . . I talked to Vicky about it a little—don’t get mad, please, let me finish—and she offered to modify her

house.” Jon let that hang for a moment.

With the drugs, Kai wasn’t his sharpest, so it took him a little longer to understand what Jon was saying. “Does that mean she . . . wants us both to move in?” His brows furrowed deeply.

“It’s an option. You could help us with the baby. We could all be a family, and you wouldn’t have to be alone.”

Kai shut the Gatorade so he could use his hands to pull his knees up to his chest and rest his chin on them. Part of him was touched by the fact that Vicky obviously cared enough about Jon to be willing to put up with the parasite that Kai was, but he knew this was likely just another recipe for Kai to destroy Jon’s life. He wanted to say something, anything, but he couldn’t even seem to form the truth into words.

“I thought you’d be happy,” Jon said, sounding heart broken.

Dammit. Even not saying anything he was fucking things up. “I ruin everything, Jon,” Kai said in a small voice.

“That’s not true. Vicky cares about you, too.”

Kai laughed and realized he was fucking crying. Again. “She barely knows me, Jon. But she’d do anything for you. I’ve seen the way she looks at you. And she obviously puts up with all the shit I create in your lives, so that right there says a lot.” Kai let his forehead hit his knees with a thud. “God, I’m so sick of this.”

He heard Jon sigh, and the shift of the mattress, and a moment later, something was nudging his shins.

Reluctantly, Kai looked up and saw a stuffed fox that looked eerily like the one Dr. Fox had given him a dozen years ago. “What . . . what’s that?” Kai asked, barely able to get out the words.

“I know I’m supposed to be grounding you in the present, but . . . I thought . . .” Jon pushed his fingers through his hair, gripping the strands. “Shit, it was a terrible idea, wasn’t it? I’m sorry. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

Kai wasn’t even sure what expression was on his face as he dropped one hand from his legs and reached out for the animal, cradling it close to him. It even smelled the same, but for some reason—maybe because of the music and the incense and the lights—he didn’t flashback. “Vicky bought this, didn’t she? And everything else?” Kai’s voice was heavy with tears, though only a few escaped his eyes.

“I didn’t tell her why. Not really, and definitely not about that—”

“I don’t deserve any of this,” Kai said, beginning to lose it. “I hurt people. That’s what I do.” He thought how if he’d died last year, he would never have hurt anyone ever again, but he didn’t voice that, because he knew *that* would hurt Jon more than anything right now.

“That’s not true. Call Renee. I think you’ll feel better if you talk to her.”

Kai took a few minutes to regulate his breathing, to get the tears under control, at least for the time being. He snuggled the fox with one arm, knowing it was ridiculous but still finding it disturbingly comforting, and accepted his phone with his other hand. Taking another deep breath, he dialed.

Renee was carefully watching her maw maw drop squares of dough into a pot of boiling oil. “Remember, the secret is the temperature of the oil. If it’s not hot enough, the beignets won’t come out right, and if it’s too hot, they’ll burn.”

Evangeline was convinced that Renee could make the beignets for Kai when she got back to Jonesville, and had spent a chunk of the day teaching her, including

making them from scratch. Renee was worried enough about making them from a Cafe du Monde mix, let alone if she had to start from raw ingredients. Still, she was doing her best to pay attention, because she really wanted to do this for Kai.

Renee watched the dough sizzling in the oil, barely hearing her phone ring above the noise. Surprised (and hoping it wasn't one of her high school classmates hoping to hit the college bars on her last night in town), Renee pulled it out of her apron pocket. Her face lit up in a smile when she saw Kai's name on her caller ID. "Kai! I hadn't heard from you since yesterday morning. I missed you."

"Hey, Re," Kai said. His voice sounded . . . off, somehow. Sad, maybe.

She remembered his confession in the car en route to the airport the other day and wondered if that had anything to do with it. Still, she decided to be delicate. "How was your Thanksgiving?"

". . . Interesting," Kai said after a long pause. He hesitated again before adding, "It's been a rough couple days."

Part of Renee hurt that Kai obviously hadn't felt he could call her and talk to her about it, but she knew that "being forthcoming wasn't Kai's default setting" as he'd told her more than once. "I'm sorry. You'll see me soon, though, right? That makes everything better." She let the smile come through in her voice.

Kai sighed heavily, which surprised and worried her. "Actually, I . . . I can't see you for a while. That's why I called."

Renee's heart fell. "What?"

"Between the airport and the planes, and being around so many people in a strange city. . . ."

"Oh." Evangeline was watching Renee surreptitiously as she removed the cooked pastries from the pot with a wire skimmer, setting them on paper towels nearby. "I hadn't even thought about that. I don't want to make you sick."

Kai took in a sharp intake of breath. "Re . . . you know I wouldn't hurt you intentionally, right?" Kai's voice was pained.

"Kai?"

"I . . . you know I told you I'm complicated, right?"

That made Renee smile faintly, though she walked farther away from the stove, concern churning in her gut. "Yeah?"

"There's . . . there's a lot about me you still don't know, and I . . ." His voice was trembling.

"Kai? What's wrong?"

"I'm in a bad place right now, Re," Kai admitted after a long pause. She was surprised by how much emotion she heard in his voice. "It's probably safer for you if you stay away from me for a while."

"I don't understand."

"I don't either, and that's the problem," Kai said in a defeated voice. "I'm so sorry." She thought she heard what sound like him breaking down into tears before her ears were met by the harsh sound of the dial tone.

Renee stood, bewildered, staring at her phone for several minutes, trying to process what just happened.

"Sugar? Are you all right?"

Renee's brows furrowed and she shook her head slowly. "I think . . . I think Kai just broke up with me."

Evangeline guided her to a chair and sat down beside her. "What do you mean

you ‘think?’”

“It was so strange. Something was clearly bothering him. He said he thought it would be better if I stayed away from him, and that he was sorry, and that he didn’t want to hurt me intentionally. I have no idea what he’s talking about.” Renee blinked rapidly. “I already told him I accepted everything about him, his health. . . .” Renee seemed to be talking to herself.

“What are you talking about?”

Renee sighed, fiddled with the apron string. “I was going to talk to you about it at some point, but everything was too hectic. . . . I guess now it doesn’t matter.”

Evangeline frowned. “I saw the way he was looking at you in that photo, hon. I’m sure whatever he said, you probably just misunderstood.”

Renee wanted to believe her grandmother; after all, Kai had *sung* for her, which he’d confessed after the fact was not something he ever did. Ever. He was still self-conscious enough, he’d admitted, about speaking, let alone trying to put a tune to it. “*I’d do anything for you*,” Kai had told her sincerely. Maybe he was sick? He hadn’t sounded like it, but maybe that was why he told her to stay away? But that didn’t make sense. He’d spoken as if being around him would be dangerous for *her*, not him. And he’d clearly been extremely upset.

“Hon?”

Renee snapped out of her thoughts and managed a faint smile. “Kai . . . he has a neuromuscular disease,” she said bluntly.

“What does that mean?”

Renee leaned back in her chair, shoving her hands into her apron pockets. “His legs don’t work right,” Renee said simply. “He needs braces, and crutches, too, sometimes, to walk, or he uses a wheelchair.” Renee looked over at her grandmother, bracing for some kind of castigation.

“I see,” Evangeline said with a nod, completely non-judgmental. “There was a boy I liked when I was younger, before I met your paw paw, who’d had polio when he was a child, and needed braces and crutches to walk. I thought he was so interesting, though. Handsome. But, believe it or not, I was too shy to do more than say a few words to him.”

That caught Renee completely off guard, and she found herself remembering their night at the movies, how incredibly sexy Kai had been, standing so tall and strong, leaning on his crutches. She sighed softly at the image, though a wave of sadness overtook her when she realized she wouldn’t get to see Kai when she got back. For how long? Did that mean he wasn’t going to come to class?

“I bet your parents won’t approve, but as long as he treats you right, your paw paw and I won’t care if he can walk or not.”

Renee tried to smile, but it was weak. She debated about whether she should explain the rest, but knew she had to. Hopefully whatever Kai was going through was temporary, and if so, she would want to be able to talk to her grandmother about everything Kai-related, and she didn’t want to have this conversation over the phone. “Thanks, Maw Maw. But . . . Kai . . .” She struggled to find a way to put it. “Kai also has a lung disease, and he had a transplant last year. So he’s healthy now, but he has to take a lot of medications, and he has to be careful about getting sick. That’s part of why he called me, to tell me I can’t be around him for a few days since I’ll be all germy.”

This information seemed to give Evangeline pause, and she spent several minutes in silence before speaking. “I don’t know much about these things, but people

don't live long after transplants, do they? I thought I saw something about that on the news, or PBS, or something."

Renee sighed. "He warned me before we got serious that he could get really sick, and he could die, but he also might not. I told him I wanted to take that risk." Renee hesitated, twisting the fabric of her apron around and around her finger, making a spiral shape that remained even after she let it go. "I love him, Maw Maw." Then Renee suddenly burst into tears.

"Shh," Evangeline whispered, pulling Renee into a hug. "It'll be OK. It'll all be OK."

November 25, 2000

Jon had tried, once again unsuccessfully, to get Kai to shower. It wasn't even so much that the bathroom scared him (though, honestly, he'd still been avoiding it, not wanting to press his luck), just the weight of depression that had settled on Kai's shoulders. He'd mostly slept through the night because of heavy sedation, which had left him trapped in an endless stream of nightmares, bits and pieces of memory merged with strange metaphor and visions of himself hurting, or even killing, Renee by mistake. When he'd finally been pulled out of sleep for his morning meds, it was as if he hadn't slept at all, and he felt even worse about himself than he had after hanging up on Renee the night before.

Kai had then endured Jon's lecture about how Kai was going to get serious cutaneous *candidiasis* (essentially, Athlete's foot all over his skin because of his immunocompromised condition), which could turn systemic if he didn't wash his body. After Kai's continued apathy, even after threats that Jon would wash him himself failed to change anything, Jon had taken to stripping Kai and wiping his skin with an antimicrobial wash. Under normal circumstances, it probably would have been humiliating, but Kai was about 250 miles past Caring and heading straight toward Don't Give A Shit at 100 mph.

"I'm not shaving you," Jon had told him, and part of Kai had wondered if he could figure out a way to convince Jon to let him shave himself without watching him constantly. He used disposable safety razors, since it was more hygienic, but when they'd first moved into the apartment four years ago, Kai had fallen into old habits of 12 years of institutional life and hidden things everywhere. Including a couple box cutter blades, one of which was taped to the back of the middle right drawer of his bathroom vanity. If Kai had a few minutes unsupervised, it'd be easy to pull the drawer out just enough to extract it.

Kai knew, in a dim part of his brain, that, like the glass shard the day before, even having the blade would be very bad idea, but he wanted it, desperately, like a junkie needing a fix. He didn't want to kill himself with it. Not that he could do it right now since Jon had seized his meds and put them out of his reach, but there were a lot more efficient ways to commit suicide, in his opinion, than slitting one's wrists. No, he just wanted to feel the pain, to bleed out some of his guilt and shame.

Unfortunately, it hadn't worked that way, so now Kai sat on the couch in Dr. Miller's office, sullen, unshaven, his stomach empty (he'd made an attempt to eat so Jon would leave him alone only to throw it up again almost immediately). Jon had left the IV cath in Kai's wrist, which still hurt, and vaguely, Kai wondered if he was getting phlebitis, but he didn't care. Jon had taped the cath well enough that Kai couldn't pull it out without a lot of effort, but he could still press on it if he wanted to feel a little jolt of pain. Which he was doing right now. He'd been sitting there for at least five minutes, absently picking at the tape just to give his fingers something to do.

"Kai, do you want to join us?" Dr. Miller asked.

Kai didn't look up. He shrugged. "Why does it matter?"

"If you don't talk to me, we can't make any progress. Don't you want to get better?"

Kai shook his head as he shrugged a single shoulder, abandoned his wrist because that pain wasn't enough anymore. "I'm pretty sure I broke Renee's heart last

night, because I'm a selfish asshole."

Dr. Miller didn't say anything. One of her pointed silences where she was waiting for Kai to elaborate. But Kai didn't feel like cooperating today. His head was throbbing from the Zofran, which had done little to quell his uneasy stomach, and really, he just couldn't see the point to any of this. He absently massaged the side of his forehead with his thumb, pressing in and moving it in circles.

"What did you tell Renee last night?" Dr. Miller prompted after she realized Kai wasn't going to say anything else.

"To stay away from me," Kai said in a defeated voice, still working on his headache. Jon hadn't given him that high a dose of benzos this morning, but it was still enough that his head felt heavy in addition to the ache. He shifted on the couch so he could lazily drape his head on the back of it.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

Kai scowled, but that made his headache worse, so he relaxed into a frown. "Did you see Jon's face? I did that." Kai met Dr. Miller's eyes for the first time since the session started. "Renee is like, five foot, one-hundred pounds. I could seriously hurt her, and not just emotionally." Kai sighed heavily, giving up on his headache. Maybe focusing on the throbbing just above his eye could distract him for now. "She's better off without me anyway. Everyone is."

Dr. Miller didn't say anything immediately, but Kai could hear her pen scratching against the paper. He wondered why she bothered with him. Once it was clear Kai wasn't going to say anything else, Dr. Miller spoke up. "You do realize that you've essentially done to Renee what Nikki did to you?"

Kai blinked at her but remained quiet.

"I think you and Nikki were drawn to each other because you're both very much alike. You both needed escape, you both didn't think you could trust. And she decided it would be better to run than potentially submit you to emotional and physical harm while at the same time shielding herself from having to share too much of her past with you. That doesn't sound familiar?"

Kai's stomach knotted as he realized (as usual) Dr. Miller was right. When framed that way, Kai had done exactly the same thing as Nikki, minus the admission of love, though their last night together had pretty much cemented the sentiment, without words. "Fuck," Kai said, finally, but it wasn't angry. He felt some of his carefully crafted nonchalance, his cold, dispassionate, protective frame of mind chipping. "Dr. M, I . . ." Kai struggled to breathe. "I don't know what to do. Yesterday . . . I hardly even know what was real and what wasn't," Kai admitted, letting his frustration and anguish seep into his voice. "I don't know what to do."

Dr. Miller shifted her weight, and she sighed, but it was a soft sound, not exasperated the way Kai would have expected, knowing how difficult he was. "That's why you're here, Kai. So I can help you learn how to deal with everything and get through this."

Kai nodded, brought his legs up to his chest, holding them in a tuck.

"How much of these flashbacks and dreams do you remember?"

Kai shrugged, squeezing his legs to pull them tighter to his chest. "Bits and pieces."

"Can you talk about any of it, or is that too difficult right now?"

Kai laid his head on his knees. He continued as if Dr. Miller hadn't spoken. "Not just stuff with my aunt. All kinds of things. Like my brain's been throwing up all

sorts of memories, some of which I didn't even know were there. Some of which I'm not even 100% sure are real."

Crossing her legs, Dr. Miller asked, "What do you mean by that?"

Kai let his lids fall closed, focusing on the colors dancing behind them. "I was remembering stuff from when I was little little, before my parents died. Or from right before my transplant when I was really out of it. Or from the hospital after my time with my aunt. Some of that stuff I don't think I could possibly remember." Kai bit his lip hard, though not enough to draw blood, and forced himself to look at Dr. Miller sincerely. "When I hurt Jon yesterday, I didn't . . . I thought . . ." Kai sighed. "I was picked on relentlessly in high school, especially my first couple years."

Dr. Miller was writing, but still looking at Kai, nodding to signal he should continue.

"It wasn't like that was the first time I'd ever been mocked. There were plenty of people at JSD who hated me because I was hearing, or teased me because of my crutches. Even at County House I was an outcast. But high school . . ." Kai shook his head. "Forget it."

"Kai," Dr. Miller said in her mildly reproachful tone. It managed to be firm without being mean, and she used it whenever she wasn't going to let him get away with backtracking or weaseling out of something.

Kai's headache was spreading along the bone from one side of his forehead to the other. "High school was really hard for me. I was just learning how to speak, I was separated from the language and the community I had known my whole life. And on top if it all, my MLS was flaring horrendously. The Mexitil made walking difficult, and gave me the worst and most consistent chronic nausea of my life."

"That's when you were flagged for having an eating disorder?"

Kai nodded. He'd mentioned it, in passing, at some point, when Dr. Miller had suggested that his stomach issues might be at least partially tied to his anxiety. "Eating Disorder Not Otherwise Specified," Kai said with a frown, as he fingerspelled the acronym to stir his memory, relating his previous diagnosis. "I've never liked eating, but not because I had some ridiculous notion that food was bad or anything. It's just . . ." Kai shrugged. "Even when I'm not feeling sick, I guess that's always in the back of my mind, and it's hard to really like food when you've spent so much time throwing up." He knew he wasn't explaining it well.

"I think I understand," Dr. Miller said. "Jon told me you haven't been eating."

Kai reflexively touched his nose, then his wrist, where the cath was. "I just . . . can't. My stomach won't settle. It's easier empty." His stomach gurgled angrily, painfully, as if to punctuate its disagreement.

"It's easier, like it's easier to stay drugged so you sleep through your problems?"

Kai shook his head. "Last night I was so heavily drugged I didn't wake up, but that doesn't mean I didn't have a string of nightmares." Kai covered his face with one hand, the other arm still hugging his legs. "I'm so fucked up. I attacked Jon because I thought . . . I thought he was this kid, Jeremy, from high school. He . . . we used to get into 'altercations' frequently," Kai said, using air quotes, his voice dripping with scorn. "I don't know what the fuck his problem was with me. Maybe because he really wasn't that big a guy but he had this whole macho bullshit persona he was trying to express, so he picked on the kid that everyone could agree was a freak, and who he figured would never be able to fight back."

Dr. Miller seemed really interested, since all of this wasn't something Kai had ever talked about with her before. "I'm guessing you did fight back."

"Fuck yeah, I did," Kai said. "I never was going to win, but I was ornery. I felt worse than shit most of the time, always exhausted from having to drag my crippled ass all over that huge school, and it was fucking annoying having to put up with Jeremy and his friends' crap constantly. Do you know how many times they managed to steal the pins from my crutches during class? It got so bad the teachers had to start keeping them leaned against the wall near their desks during the period, which left me trapped. But at least I wasn't falling and making myself look like even more of an asshat." Kai was beginning to get angry, though it was a different anger than he'd been used to the past few months. This was more like a slow burn that radiated off him like a fever.

"So your aunt wasn't the only one who manipulated your mobility?"

Kai sighed, which was more of a groan. His headache was a low, steady throb now, his stomach swirling. He suspected Dr. Miller was purposefully trying to lead him somewhere, and he really didn't want to follow that breadcrumb trail, but the past couple days had made it painfully clear that he needed to figure something out, soon. "No," he finally admitted through gritted teeth.

"Other than this Jeremy, who else may have done that?"

Kai picked at a loose string on his sweats, not wanting to answer, not liking how he could already feel the intense emotions bubbling up inside him like a geyser waiting to explode. "It happened at CH sometimes. Partially because I didn't have my own wheelchair." Kai hesitated. Some of the orderlies had been real sadistic assholes, some of them more overtly abusive to the kids than others, and he didn't want to remember. There were other memories he didn't want to call up now, especially since he couldn't trust his fucked up brain not to bring them to life before his eyes. Kai squeezed his lids shut to mimic the way it felt like his chest had caved in. "Becca . . ." He finally added, but he couldn't finish the sentence, shaking his head.

Dr. Miller barely seemed to react, as if she'd been expecting both admissions. "Did you ever have any intrusive memories or overwhelming emotions any of those other times?"

Kai opened his eyes, narrowed them at the doctor. "What the fuck do you think?" he asked, familiar anger wonderfully surging to replace the self-loathing, fear, and despair that had started creeping up.

"Kai."

"No one. Not you. Not Jon. Not Nikki or Renee or David or anyone able bodied can understand what that's like, all right? No, I didn't start hallucinating like I have lately, but yeah, it really fucking got to me. Is that what you want to hear?" Kai felt that indescribable sensation, that churning deep inside him, that combustible, overpowering raw emotion that usually preceded freaking out, big time, but he didn't fight it. Instead, he just rode it, because he had to get it out, had to make Dr. Miller comprehend what she could never truly understand. "That I can't help thinking that if I had been able to walk like a normal fucking human being that my aunt wouldn't have been able to lock me up? That maybe she wouldn't have seen me as so . . . repulsive? Or at least that I could have stopped her?" Kai had more he knew he wanted to say, but he was shaking, almost vibrating, and his thoughts were racing so fast he couldn't quite put them all together, let alone into words, and he just screamed in frustration, needing some kind of release and unable to find it.

Vaguely, he knew Dr. Miller was talking to him, trying to soothe him, but he

was just lost. He was gone. He was pinned to that bank of lockers, the handles digging into his back, gasping, his shoulders aching from struggling to breathe and from the angle at which he was held, while Jeremy and his crew berated him and laughed when he tried to cuss them out in return.

I'm not worthless, I'm not helpless, I'm not a freak. Kai kept trying to tell himself these things, but it was difficult when he *was* helpless, when he *was* a freak, when he *was* worthless. When he realized that no one really gave a shit about him on this planet except maybe, in passing, David or Jake or Art or Jo. But none of them would really care if Jeremy killed him, either directly or indirectly. He would die and his body would be cremated and then thrown away, like garbage.

"Kai." That voice didn't fit—especially since none of the kids at school ever called him that, not without mocking the way he struggled to pronounce his own fucking name. How could he have ever known when he'd made it his legal first name how fucking hard that sliding A to I sound was to make?

"Kai."

Kai was waiting for the real punches to start, the ones that would steal his breath and make him hurl and prove him even more of a freak. The ones that he somehow knew would land him in the hospital. That would collapse his lung and break his ribs and leave him in excruciating pain for weeks.

"Kai."

Jeremy's fist moved in slow motion toward Kai's side, Kai squeezing his eyes shut to brace himself for the impact, for the searing pain of broken ribs. But suddenly something soft appeared in Kai's hands—which didn't make sense. Fluffy, smelling like artificial fur. How—? It was so jarring that Kai blinked several times, and when he opened his eyes again, the high school, the lockers, Jeremy and his gang had all melted away to Dr. Miller's office, warm and inviting, and Dr. Miller and Jon. He felt like Dorothy at the end of *The Wizard of Oz*.

"It happened again. Fuck," Kai said as he came back to himself, realizing Jon had given him the stuffed fox. Kai was sitting on the couch, his legs spread out in front of him, his head reclined on the top of it, breathing heavily. Though part of him wanted to toss the toy, to not admit how much he liked the way it felt in his hands, how it brought up old memories, but not intrusively; instead, they warmed him from the inside, reminded him that not everyone was bad, not everyone mistreated him. That sometimes, even people who didn't know him well could take a few minutes to make him feel better.

Dr. Miller and Jon were talking softly, though Kai wasn't entirely sure if it was to him or to each other, because he was still not entirely in the present, his head swimming a little. He saw a hand waving at him, and followed the blur of fingers, his arms still cradling the stuffed toy under his chin.

"*You here?*"

Kai's eyes wandered around the room again, picking out familiar details of Dr. Miller's office, like her large mahogany desk, the spider plant near the window, the filing cabinets topped with books and mementos, the bookshelf filled with textbooks and self help books. Finally, he nodded, but a kernel of fear still coursed through his blood.

"*Do you want me to stay with you, or go back to the waiting room?*"

Both Jon and Dr. Miller seemed to be waiting, calmly, for him to answer.

"I'm getting worse," Kai said flatly, surprised he wasn't more panicky. Perhaps the Xanax from this morning, perhaps his body just couldn't produce the stress

chemicals in high doses anymore, his glands exhausted from the past couple days of overwork. “Will this keep happening?”

Dr. Miller sighed, signaled for Jon to sit since Kai hadn’t dismissed him. “There are techniques we can try that can help, but I can’t snap my fingers and make everything stop, Kai.”

Kai shook his head. “I know. I just . . . there’s no warning sometimes. One minute, I’m here, and the next . . .” Kai rolled his neck. He felt so weary. Even when he couldn’t trust anyone, including his own body, he always was able to master his mind, his emotions, his memories. And now he couldn’t even control that. “I can’t stay in my room forever, blasting metal, burning sage, watching a flashing light show while I chew on sour candy and cuddle a stuffed animal to try to keep myself grounded in reality.” Kai looked at Jon, who had avoided a full black eye, thankfully, though his cheek was deeply bruised and puffy. “I can’t trust I won’t attack someone. That I won’t hurt myself. Without even realizing what I’m doing.” He looked down at the little fox, who was smiling, and he felt a sharp ache in his chest. “I think . . .” He buried his face in the fur for a moment, inhaling the smell, trying to cling to a good memory, to hope, for once. “I think maybe I should go into the hospital.”

Jon let out an abbreviated gasp.

“I do think that’s the best course of action at the moment, Kai.”

“Just. Promise me . . .” He looked over at his wheelchair. “That I have my own chair for when I’m not . . .” Kai shuddered. “Restrained?”

Dr. Miller nodded. Kai suspected, though he didn’t really have any evidence, that Dr. Miller would have understood (as well as anyone walking could) why that was so important to him, even without his earlier admissions. “They won’t be happy about it, but I’ll see what I can do.”

Kai’s stomach cramped up as he looked from Jon to Dr. Miller and admitted, “I’ll . . . I’ll try to be cooperative, even if I have to do . . . group. I don’t . . . I don’t want this to be my life.”

Dr. Miller smiled, and that made his heart soar, because he could feel that she was proud of him, and as ridiculous as it was, that was important to him. “That’s really good, Kai. I know how difficult this is for you. You’ll have sessions with me daily, but you will also see other doctors, too. I’ll try to see if I can get people that I trust will be compatible with you, to make this as easy as possible. OK?”

Kai nodded and looked to Jon, then back at Dr. Miller. “Will I get to see Jon?”

Dr. Miller sighed. “Probably not. It’ll depend on how long you’re there and what your doctors and I think is best for your stability.” Kai noticed she didn’t say “recovery,” and it made him doubt himself.

“Do you think I’ll have to be there a long time? I . . .” Kai shivered. “I know I’m in no shape now to go to school anyway, but—”

“This isn’t like the movies. You won’t be there indefinitely. Most likely, considering how unstable you’ve become the past day, I’d guess a few days to a week. That’ll give time for the Celexa to work, for you to get away from any stressful situations that might be exacerbating your symptoms.”

Kai nodded, hugged the fox against his chest tightly. “I’m really scared,” he admitted, not bothering to deny or hide it, feeling that tension as an uncomfortable tingle in his body, like the acid that was gnawing at his stomach.

Jon moved until he was sitting beside Kai, pushing some of Kai’s hair out of his face affectionately and staring directly into his eyes. “Bravery is doing something you

need to do even when you're afraid," Jon said. "You're the bravest person I know. I'm proud of you, Kai. And I admire you so much." Jon pulled Kai into a hug. "I love you. I never stopped. And I never will. OK?"

Kai nodded enthusiastically against his brother's neck as tears began to blur his vision, squeezing Jon back tightly. "I'm so sorry I hurt you. Please . . . tell Re I'm sorry, too, and I'll talk to her when I'm out of the hospital."

Jon didn't let go. "I'll pick her up this afternoon and sit down with her. I'll explain the situation as best I can without giving too much away. All right?"

Kai let the sobbing take him, not fighting it this time, clutching Jon desperately as if he were his lifeline, grateful for the secure way his brother held him back.

"You'll be OK," Jon soothed. "You'll get through this. And I'll come visit you as soon as I can. I promise." Jon pulled back, holding Kai's shoulders and kissing his forehead. "You're not alone, Kai. Never forget that."

Even though Renee knew Jon, not Kai, was picking her up, she couldn't help the hopeful flutter that sprang up in her chest when she saw a blond head above the sea of faces. It felt crushing as she wove her way through the departing passengers and eager family members all struggling to crowd into the limited space to stay out of the cold. Jon was reclined against the wall, his hands shoved into the pockets of his wool coat, and despite the facial resemblance, otherwise looking absolutely nothing like Kai, so much it was a shock. She noticed the bruise on his cheek, which looked incredibly painful, wondering if Jon would explain it at some point.

He nodded at her, struggling and failing at a faint smile, before turning and silently leading her out into the cold parking lot. It became pretty obvious that Jon wasn't going to attempt to speak over the harsh wind, which ate through her jeans and nipped at her skin. Again, part of her half hoped to find Kai waiting for them in the car, a wave of disappointment washing over her when they walked through the handicapped spots toward the back of the lot, where Jon had parked.

Again, without a word, Jon unlocked the car and climbed in, so she followed, sinking into the passenger seat, which was pushed as far back as possible. Her heart ached as she adjusted it, realizing Kai was probably the last one to sit there, and though Jon didn't seem like he was going to speak any time soon, Renee couldn't help saying something.

"What happened to Kai?" Jon had only said that Kai was in the hospital, and probably would be for a week, that Jon would pick her up and explain as well as he could. So Renee had spent the last day worrying and wondering, still puzzling over that final telephone call and unable to reconcile her mind and heart.

Jon sighed as he pulled out of the parking lot. "Is your roommate home yet?"

The nonsequitur caught her off guard. "Uh, she shouldn't be home until tomorrow."

"Good," Jon said with a nod as he maneuvered onto the highway. "We'll talk at your place."

After several more minutes passed, Renee realized Jon wasn't going to say anything else, so she shifted in her seat and forced herself to focus on the scenery, trying desperately not to cry.

"Coffee?" Renee asked, gesturing with the carafe.

Jon stared at it for a long moment as he mechanically stripped out of his coat

before finally nodding. He seemed tired, distracted, but he was so strikingly unlike his brother in so many ways that she couldn't read him. It was awkward and disconcerting, because every time she caught him in her peripheral vision, she'd expect to turn and see golden hair and bright blue eyes, strong arms leaning on crutches and a lopsided smile. Instead, she saw a far lankier, narrower frame, arms folded on his chest, gray eyes distant and wheaten hair sticking up at odd angles from where he repeatedly carded his fingers through it.

"How do you take it? The milk's spoiled, but I have some Coffee-Mate." Renee asked, and it took several repetitions before Jon finally responded.

"Uh, just black, thank you." He'd gone back to leaning against the wall, pulling his fingers through his hair over and over in what was evidently a nervous habit.

Renee hurriedly prepared each cup, adding coffee before the machine had even fully finished, drips hissing on the hotplate. "Let's sit," she said, offering Jon his mug.

He nodded and walked toward the couches, long strides that took him there quickly, though he hesitated to sit until Renee had curled up in her favorite spot, elbow supported by the armrest as she cradled her mug in her hands.

Jon gulped the coffee, seemingly unperturbed by how hot it was, finishing most of it in a few swallows before setting it aside and taking a seat diagonal to her. "Before I begin, I want to make it clear that Kai asked me to pick you up and to talk to you, so I am doing this as a favor to him. That said, I'm only going to tell you enough so that you can understand what Kai's going through right now. You can ask me questions, but I can't promise I'll be able to answer them." Jon paused only long enough to see that Renee was listening before continuing. "Some of what I say, and especially in light of the last call you had with Kai, might upset you or make you angry, but I ask that you let me fully explain before you let your emotions take over and stop you from listening to me."

It felt strange to hear Jon speak so much after the long silence of the drive. "All right," she said, not sure what else to say to that. Her gut was churning, and she found she couldn't really stomach the coffee, especially without milk, so she mostly held it for the warmth, to give her something to focus on. Her mind could only come up with the worst possible scenarios—after all, Kai had warned her he could get very sick at any time—though she tried to take a few steadying breaths and keep herself receptive to whatever Jon was about to tell her.

Jon pushed his fingers through his hair and sighed, as if trying to work out how to begin. "You know our parents died when Kai was six, and you know he grew up in an institution."

Renee nodded. "County House. I went with him on Halloween."

Jon smoothed his hair down, speaking slowly. "And you know Kai; you know he tries to act like nothing bothers him, like he doesn't feel pain, physical or emotional."

Renee remembered the afternoon when she'd finally found out about Kai's transplant, how incredibly difficult it had been for him to talk about it. She also remembered their *Hamlet* movie night, how he had obviously been in a lot of pain but had denied it vehemently, insisting it wasn't a big deal. How many times he tried to take back something he'd said or hide by passing it off as a joke, or by making fun of himself. Over the past few weeks, he'd gotten better at being open with her, but those behaviors were so ingrained, it would take time. Time she had been willing to give him.

"I can't go into specifics, but Kai went through things as a kid that . . ." Jon seemed to be struggling to find a way to explain, perhaps while still remaining vague. He sighed heavily, reached for his mug and downed the rest of his coffee in one gulp. "Do

you know what PTSD is?”

Renee blinked, partially distracted by her ingrained manners wanting to ask if he needed a refill, but she forced herself to focus. “Uh. Post-traumatic stress disorder, right? Isn’t that the thing that like, soldiers get and stuff?”

Jon traced his finger around the lip of his mug, focusing on it instead of her. “Yes. Sometimes, when someone goes through a traumatic experience, they sequester the memories and the feelings associated with it so they can survive. But this means the individual never actually dealt with his problems. They’re still there, in some ways worse than if they’d been tackled originally.” Jon raised his eyes to finally meet Renee’s, and it struck her that as different as they were from Kai’s bright blue, the pale gray was disturbingly beautiful, yet sad, like a dead tree covered in fresh snow. “Think of it like cleaning your room, but instead of actually tackling the mess, you simply stuff everything into the closet. As long as you ignore the closet, you can pretend you’re fine. But if something makes that door open even a crack, suddenly all that crap falls on you and can completely, totally bury you.”

Renee had been surprised by Jon’s attempt to use an analogy to explain; from the little contact she’d had with him, and everything Kai had told her about him, she’d expected some kind of science robot who forgot that not everyone knew medical terminology. “Thanks for explaining it like that,” she said, taking a sip of her coffee. “That makes sense.” She took a deep breath. “So are you saying that’s what’s wrong with Kai? He had this closet and something opened it and he got buried?”

Jon nodded. “Kai’s been having major anxiety problems for the past few months, but it wasn’t something he was ready to tell you about. He . . . well, you know Kai. He worried if you knew about that, you’d think less of him. Maybe even not want to be with him anymore.”

“I would never. That’s not—” Renee instantly started to defend herself, but Jon held up a hand, shaking his head.

“I’m just trying to get you to understand why he kept it from you.”

Renee sighed, set her mug aside and curled up tighter on the couch. She’d noticed Kai occasionally got tense, distracted, and he’d been a surprising mess about their midterm, but he really was amazingly good at hiding. It made her angry at herself, that she hadn’t picked up more that something was bothering him, but then she remembered how good Kai was at concealing emotions. “Did he keep it from you, too?”

Jon nodded. “At first, yes. He probably would have let it go even longer if things hadn’t worked out differently. And even then, I only found out some of the details a few days ago. Again, out of necessity, more than anything.”

“So . . . what does this mean? Why . . . why is he in the hospital?”

Jon absentmindedly touched his cheek.

Renee’s thoughts began to race, and she struggled not to freak out. After all, Jon had warned her that she might get upset prematurely. Some of Kai’s words from his last phone call surfaced. “*You know I’d never hurt you intentionally. . . . It’s safer if you stay away from me.*” “He hit you?”

Jon’s shoulders slumped, maybe in embarrassment, maybe in defeat, she couldn’t tell, because he’d dipped his head to mask his face. “Kai hasn’t been well the past few days. Not entirely himself,” Jon said, looking up with a wince as if knowing that was an understatement, but unwilling to say more. “He decided it was best for everyone if he went into the hospital for the week.”

“But he did hit you,” Renee repeated, not making it a question this time, unable

to prevent the shiver of fear coursing through her body. She'd trusted Kai, despite how strong he was, how much larger he was than her, and a little voice in her head couldn't help screaming that he could have hurt her the other night. *Just like Jude*. What if he had?

Jon seemed to see the emotions clearly on Renee's face. "I asked you not to get upset." But he sighed wearily. He pulled his fingers through his hair again, over and over. "Kai cares about you, and the last thing he would ever want to do is harm you in any way. That phone call—it's partially my fault; I thought hearing your voice would help him, and I pushed him into it—he just wanted to protect you." Jon pulled at the strands of hair, clearly frustrated. He hesitated a long moment, pushing himself to his feet and pacing restlessly in a tight loop between the couch and coffee table, his hand constantly in his hair, as if he were debating something internally.

Just when Renee was about say something, Jon stopped suddenly, looked at her directly, his eyes sincere, though still troubled. One foot tapped the floor, as if he were impatient, before finally sinking back down into the couch. He let out a long sigh through pursed lips, looked up at the ceiling before finally deciding to speak again. "That's all Kai wanted me to tell you, but . . . I'm going to go a little beyond that because I think it's something you deserve to know, so you can make your own mind up about the whole situation."

When Renee realized Jon was waiting for some response from her, she nodded. "Thank you," she said in a small voice.

Jon inhaled deeply through his nose, looking worried, as if he were contemplating changing his mind. After several more uncomfortable minutes, he continued, "Kai has been having a lot of intrusive memories—think of them like particularly vivid nightmares, only he's awake when they happen. And he hasn't always been able to distinguish between those and reality." Jon winced again, and when he looked up, she saw in his eyes something familiar, like he was expecting Renee to immediately reject Kai after this revelation. "He hit me because he didn't know it was me. He was scared and lost and he lashed out reflexively to try to protect himself. . . . But that's why he decided to go into the hospital. So he can get himself back under control, because he spent most of yesterday night terrified by the possibility of hurting you."

Renee felt tears welling up, and she struggled to blink them away. "Will he be OK?" She wanted to ask, "Will I ever be safe with him?," but she held that back.

Jon nodded. "In time, yes. He's already been in therapy for several months, but this isn't something that can be fixed overnight, especially since Kai's spent most of the last sixteen years suppressing his emotions and memories."

Despite her worry and fear, Renee asked, "Will I be able to see him?"

Jon shook his head. "While he's an inpatient? Probably not. And part of the reason I'm here is to make you understand that if Kai keeps his distance from you for a while, it's largely because he doesn't trust himself, and though I know he misses you, he doesn't want to risk hurting you."

Renee nodded as a few tears dotted her cheek. "Tell him to just get better for me, OK? And that I don't care about anything. I just care about him. And I miss him, and I want to see him as soon as he's ready. OK?"

Jon smiled faintly, and when he did, she could see more of the resemblance. "Kai cares about you. More than anyone else since I've known him as an adult. Whatever happens, remember that, please?" Jon's gray eyes looked particularly sad for a moment as he let his words sink in. "You may not believe this, but you're good for him. I haven't

seen him happy the way he's been lately . . ." Jon shook his head. "Since before our parents died. I'm not trying to pressure you, because I know this is a lot to take in, and I have no idea how Kai . . . I don't know what things'll be like when he's discharged. But he really needs friends right now, people he can trust will be there for him." Jon dipped his head and just breathed for several minutes, as if he were trying to compose himself. "You have my number, but I'll keep you up to date if anything changes." Jon pushed his way to his feet. "Thank you for the coffee."

Renee stood and wrapped her arms around Jon in a quick, grateful hug. Though he was equally tall as Kai, his body felt entirely different; soft yet bony, not the hard, lean muscle she was used to. "Thank you for telling me everything, so I'm not worrying or thinking he was breaking up with me, or . . . you know," she said, leaving out "feeling betrayed."

Jon patted her back awkwardly, clearly uncertain what to do, before finally stepping back. His face twitched in another attempt at a smile, and he carded his hair one more time before grabbing his coat and heading to the door.

Before he could pull it open to leave, Renee rushed up, stopping him. She tilted her head to look up at him, needing to meet his eyes so he could see the sincerity in hers. "Can you give him a message for me? When you see him?"

A subtle frown pulled at Jon's lips, but he nodded.

"Tell him . . ." Renee sucked in a huge breath as her heart and mind raced. "Tell him I'll wait for him." *Tell him I love him*, she thought, but held it back; it wasn't the kind of thing she wanted him to hear second hand. "I'll wait. As long as he needs."

The door closed with a final click that caused a cold sweat to break out all over Kai's body. Then the lights dimmed. Not pure blackness, but close, definitely darker than any other hospital room he was used to. Thankfully, Dr. Miller had insisted Kai only be restrained if absolutely necessary, though his hands had been slipped into these padded mitts to keep him from hurting himself. The mitts kept his hands open and separated his fingers, taking away his ability to grip anything and any dexterity he might have, but he could still use his hands to shift his body in the bed, so it didn't completely strip his freedom of movement.

He had managed to push himself onto his side, albeit rather awkwardly, since he couldn't grip his legs, just kind of shove them into place by pushing against them. But he at least managed to moderately curl his legs up and face the door, which didn't do much to ease the terror, but made him feel a little better.

The IV cath in his wrist had been removed and replaced with a CVC in his neck, through which a slow, steady drip of something sedating flowed. Enough that it kept him from going full panic right now, despite the fact that everything about his current situation was triggering his phobias: the dark, the closed door, being separated from his wheelchair, being alone. . . . That was something else he hadn't expected. The psych ward was so, so quiet compared to the rest of the hospital. Eerily quiet. Perhaps the rooms were soundproofed. Whatever the case, the quiet might have been enough to keep Kai awake if it weren't for the drugs. Still, the dosage wasn't enough to immediately knock him out, and he wondered how long he'd lie there, trembling, his stomach knotting, trying not to be terrified and failing desperately.

In addition to the cath, he'd also gotten a nasogastric feeding tube, the same kind he'd kept feeling imaginary sensations of the day before, flashing back to his hospital stay when he was ten, and he kept wrinkling his nose as if to prove it was really

there and not another hallucination. It was annoying and unpleasant, but a requirement of his admission, he'd been informed, and part of Kai was grateful for it, because it meant he wouldn't be forced to eat, at least for a few days. The overnight feeding, plus the IV, plus the fact that even Kai didn't trust himself not to lose it was the reason for the mitts, which were awkward and uncomfortable but better than full restraints. They were strapped securely to his wrists, but not locked, and Kai knew if he were desperate enough, he could probably use his teeth to loosen the double layer of Velcro and belts enough to pull a hand out. And they were padded on the palm side, to minimize any kind of blunt-force injury he might attempt to do with them, but again, Kai knew if he were agitated enough, lost in a memory, nothing short of fully restraining his upper body could stop him from hurting himself or someone else.

And that terrified him.

The darkness, the isolation, the quiet all weighed heavily on Kai, suffocating him as he struggled to take slow, even breaths, to focus on the rough sheets beneath him, on the fabric of the mitts beneath and between his fingers, on the silence, all as ways to keep himself grounded, to try not to panic or find himself suddenly in that horrible bathroom. As tears trailed from Kai's eyes, his heart thundering in his chest, his body trembling, he wondered if maybe he'd made a mistake.

End Season 2.

Appendix I: Faux-Wikipedia Entry: FS

FS

FS, previously known as FOX Syndrome or Failure of X component, is a congenital genetic obstructive pulmonary disease of which little is known. Neither the mechanism nor genetics of the disease are well understood, and there is some debate in the scientific community as to whether FS should be classified as a disease separate from other pulmonary conditions such as asthma and cystic fibrosis.

Symptoms & Signs

The primary symptoms of FS are reminiscent of severe, brittle asthma, including acute paroxysms of wheezing, chest pain and congestion, accompanied by a corresponding drop in forced expiratory volume in one second (FEV₁), usually the result of environmental triggers such as allergens, ozone, cigarette smoke, and cold air. However, unlike most asthmatics, FS patients suffer from greater perfusion discrepancies, often suffering from significant drops in oxygen saturation (Sa_{O₂}) not normally seen in traditional asthma; in fact, it is not uncommon for FS patients to have abnormally low (>90%) Sa_{O₂ even outside an exacerbation. As a result, clubbing deformities of the fingers are commonly seen in FS patients, a sign typical of those with cystic fibrosis, but not asthma.}



Clubbing of Fingers

Although psychological and physical stress has been discovered not to play a role in asthma attacks, the slightly different mechanism of FS attacks suggest that stress may affect exacerbations of the disease, lending credence to the hormonal mechanism of disease theory (see below).

FS patients also often exhibit excess mucus production in the airways. Although the mechanism for this is not related to CF, the resulting symptoms and sequelae are similar. These include excess coughing, severe chest congestion and difficulty clearing secretions, and increased susceptibility to pneumonia and fibrosis.

Airways narrowed by inflammation and excess mucus increase the work of breathing, so that many patients must use accessory muscles to breathe, and in advanced disease with the addition of fibrosis, may suffer from fatigue of their respiratory muscles so that mechanical support may be necessary. Additionally, these effects (narrowed airways and muscle fatigue) sometimes lead to aphonia or dysphonia in some patients, particularly in childhood.

Some patients also seem to exhibit certain hematological abnormalities that may affect both oxygen saturation capacity and immune function, although it isn't yet clear if these abnormalities are comorbid conditions or symptoms of FS itself.

Mechanism of Disease

The exact mechanism of FS is unknown, although several theories exist. One suggests an autoimmune model, in which dysfunction of the patient's own immune system is the cause of symptoms. However, limited studies suggest that even with immunosuppression, symptoms aren't entirely resolved, so that it may be possible immunological problems are only partially responsible for symptoms.

The second theory is hormonal, suggesting that some errant feedback loop in the body's inflammatory response (perhaps combined with a heightened sensitivity to inflammatory mediators such as histamine) might be responsible for the asthma-like attacks as well as the excess mucus production, although research in this area is still in the early stages.

Diagnosis

Most patients present with symptoms of respiratory distress or recurrent pneumonia in infancy or early childhood, with most patients diagnosed as either severe, brittle asthmatics or occasionally, with cystic fibrosis.

Because of the complicated nature of the disease and the mystery behind its mechanism, diagnosis of FS is challenging, and it is believed to be vastly under-diagnosed, with many asthmatics—particularly those exhibiting uncharacteristic fibrosis—likely being misdiagnosed FS patients.

A thorough history, combined with pulmonary function tests and blood saturation, along with lung biopsy and sputum analysis are the best means of arriving at a diagnosis of FS, especially if cystic fibrosis and asthma can be ruled out.

The physician who is faced with intractable asthma, particularly when associated with signs of chronic hypoxia (such as routinely low oxygen saturation and clubbing) and recurrent pneumonia, may consider a diagnosis of FS.

Treatment

Current treatment for FS is similar to that of asthma and CF. Most patients respond decently to traditional asthma medications, including oral and inhaled corticosteroids, and short- and long-term acting beta₂-adrenoceptor agonists, anticholinergic agents, delivered via inhaler (metered-dose or dry-powder) or nebulizer. Theophylline has also shown to be effective in some patients.

FS patients should monitor their peak flow regularly, as changes can signal an upcoming attack. In addition, many patients may benefit from a portable pulse oximeter to be alert to any signs of oxygen saturation changes, even before symptoms present.

Additionally, Amphigazol, the first medication approved by the FDA to treat FS, can ameliorate excess mucus production and help minimize opportunistic pulmonary infection. Some patients, particularly those with muscle fatigue, may benefit from cough assistance, either via manual percussion or machine to aid in loosening and expelling secretions.

Oxygen, delivered via mask or cannulae (or via transtracheal distribution in more advanced disease), may also be helpful in easing dyspnea and discomfort and resolving cyanosis.

In later stages of the disease in which extensive fibrosis has led to significant lung dysfunction, and in cases of muscle fatigue, ventilatory support via noninvasive (biPAP) or invasive (endotracheal intubation) mechanical ventilation may be needed in the short- or long-term. However, because of the propensity for excess mucus production, intubated patients must be carefully managed and suctioned frequently to prevent mucus accumulation and plugs.

It is still unclear whether lung transplantation (either a single or double-lung transplant) can be beneficial in the long-term for FS patients, as few patients have undergone successful transplantation.

Prognosis

Because FS patients are susceptible to recurrent pneumonia as well as fibrosis, in addition to chronically low SaO₂, lifespan for most is short, with many patients

succumbing in their late teens to twenties. Death results from asphyxiation as a result of an acute attack, sepsis due to infection, organ failure due to insufficient perfusion, respiratory failure due to bronchiolitis obliterans, or secondary heart failure as a result of pulmonary insufficiency.

Patients may experience secondary effects due to oxygen deprivation, such as brain and organ damage, especially if not treated appropriately.

Dr. Jon Taylor

Along with Drs. Benjamin Johnsen and David MacDonald, Dr. Jon Taylor is responsible for identifying FS as a distinct condition in the mid-90s while still a fellow. Today, he runs the Jonesville Memorial FS Clinic and Research Center in Jonesville, IA, which focuses on the research and treatment of the disease. In 2008, partially due to additional grants, the clinic was able to open its own building with dedicated labs and exam rooms to expand its research and treatment of patients with FS.

Dr. Taylor and his staff will diagnose and workup a treatment plan for any patient who walks through the clinic doors, regardless of their ability to pay.

Appendix II: Faux-Wikipedia Entry: MLS

MLS

MLS, previously known as “Muscular Latency Syndrome,” is a congenital, genetic, progressive neuromuscular disease. Although the mechanism of disease is well understood (dysfunction of acetylcholinesterase at the neuromuscular junction, see below), the genetics are not. MLS tends to affect males more than females, so it is likely sex-linked, but scientists haven't yet identified the exact genes involved, and suspect it is probably due to multiple genetic factors.

Symptoms & Signs

The disease usually presents in early childhood, although due to its rarity, it is often misdiagnosed, or goes undiagnosed until later childhood, as early symptoms can often be mistaken for "growing pains." Children experience muscle pain and cramping, usually beginning in the lower limbs and working upward over time. Pain is often accompanied by muscle weakness, and ultimately paralysis. Although early in the course of the disease reflexes may be intact, over time reflexes diminish and ultimately disappear in the affected areas.

Most children need some kind of orthotic or other walking aid early in life, with the majority using wheelchairs by their late teens to mid-twenties.

In stage I of the disease, only the skeletal muscles are affected, usually beginning with the feet, progressing upward to the ankles, calves, thighs, hips, and then arms in a distal fashion. Progression is not perfectly symmetrical. Patients experience paroxysms, often precipitated or exacerbated by emotional or physiological stress, in which they experience asynchronous, asymmetrical fasciculations (muscle spasms), often accompanied by myotonia (delayed relaxation of the muscle due to overstimulation). Occasionally, spasms can be severe (and violent) enough as to be considered tetantic. Especially in the early stages of the disease, attacks are often followed by extended periods of extreme muscle weakness and hypotonia. Repeated overstimulation of the neuromuscular junction results in decreased sensitivity to acetylcholine, ultimately leading to paralysis of the affected muscles.

In stage II of the disease, smooth muscle and cardiac muscle (as well as the diaphragm) are affected, resulting in cardiac (bradycardia), circulatory (hypotension), and respiratory dysfunction (bronchoconstriction and increase mucosal secretions), in addition to GI disturbances and incontinence. As in stage I, the disease is progressive, with some patients losing function more quickly than others. Once a patient enters stage II, lifespan is usually no more than five years, with most dying of respiratory or cardiac failure.

Mechanism of Disease

The symptoms of MLS are caused by a defect in acetylcholinesterase, the enzyme responsible for breaking down acetylcholine, the primary neurotransmitter involved in muscle contraction.

In normal muscle contraction, a nerve impulse results in the release of acetylcholine, which stimulates the muscle to contract. Acetylcholinesterase is then released to rapidly (and efficiently) metabolize acetylcholine in order to terminate the contraction.

However, due to the dysfunction of acetylcholinesterase in the neuromuscular junction of MLS patients, acetylcholine is not broken down efficiently, causing it to build up, resulting in overstimulation of the muscle.

Although acetylcholine is found in the central nervous system, it is unaffected in MLS, as the defect is only in the neuromuscular junctions and acetylcholine does not pass the blood-brain barrier. This distinguishes MLS from other acetylcholinesterase-deficiency syndromes or neurotoxin poisoning such as organophosphate poisoning.

How the disease progresses from stage I to stage II is not fully understood, but it is theorized that it may have to do with a decrease in quality of acetylcholinesterase over time, perhaps due to secondary factors affecting acetylcholinesterase production.

In some very rare cases, patients actually produce and release more acetylcholine than normal, exacerbating symptoms, and leading to seepage of acetylcholine into the blood stream. In these patients, excess acetylcholine can reach areas of the body normally unaffected by the disease (at the current stage), such as the blood vessels, heart, diaphragm, and GI. These patients thus don't present as pure stage-I or stage-II patients, but rather as a hybrid of the two during severe exacerbations. Although with current enzyme treatments this form of the disease is more easily managed, it is considered a more severe presentation than traditional dual-stage MLS.

Diagnosis

Before the realization that acetylcholinesterase deficiency was the mechanism of disease, diagnosis of MLS was tricky, with many patients being misdiagnosed as having cerebral palsy or simply muscular dystrophy of unknown etiology. Diagnosis was often one of elimination, after other disorders had been ruled out.

Today, a simple blood test for acetylcholine (along with history) is often enough to make a diagnosis of MLS.

Treatment

Until 2006, treatment was largely devoted to maximizing function and minimizing pain through physical therapy and various muscle relaxants (including Valium, Pavulon,

Mexitil, and Dantrolene). Today, however, patients have access to enzyme-replacement therapy, which has revolutionized treatment of the disease.

Much like insulin for diabetics, MLS patients can dose themselves with replacement acetylcholinesterase, decreasing blood and local acetylcholine levels, and minimizing symptoms. Early studies indicate that children who are diagnosed early and who begin rigorous treatment with enzyme replacement can minimize symptoms enough as to lead nearly normal lives. So far, early evidence indicates that enzyme replacement can vastly extend the lifespans of those with the disease, since stage II onset is greatly delayed and even possibly diverted in some patients.

However, access to enzyme therapy is limited due to the inherent instability of the enzyme and difficulty in producing it en masse, meaning many MLS patients must suffer without it until advances can be developed in its production, distribution, and cost.

Many patients, especially those suffering from the rarer variant in which excess acetylcholine is produced, can benefit from a low- choline diet, which minimizes the body's ability to synthesize acetylcholine. However, acetylcholine is essential for proper nerve function (and choline is an essential nutrient), and thus cannot be completely eliminated from the diet. Likewise, due to the effects severe shifts of acetylcholine can cause, dosage of enzyme therapy must be carefully monitored and adjusted to prevent untoward side effects.

Dr. Ira Schwartz

Considered one of the foremost experts on MLS in the world, he founded a research and treatment clinic in Manhattan in 1980, devoted to researching new treatments for the disease as well as training nurses and therapists to ameliorate the lives of those afflicted by the disease. Largely due to a significant influx of private funding in 2005, Dr. Schwartz was able to develop an enzyme-replacement therapy, the first true treatment for MLS. He currently has expanded his clinic to both increase the amount of research as well as number of patients under his care, and is currently working on an improved enzyme treatment. In addition, his researchers are currently exploring the possible genetic origins of the disease in the hopes of one day finding a cure.

Appendix III: On Writing ASL

You'll see a lot of ASL in *In/Exhale*, especially in Season 2. Because ASL is a visual language (with no standard written form), it has to be represented in English in some way. Of course, you can never fully represent ASL in written words, but I try my best to convey this beautiful language as best as I can.

You'll see me do so in several ways:

1- Descriptions of signs. This happens occasionally when we're in the POV of a character who doesn't know ASL, and I'm describing what they're seeing as they watch the signs. Sometimes, they'll be able to clearly see individual signs, other times, not so much. I'll also use this occasionally when I'm in a character's POV who does know ASL to help the reader appreciate more what the signs look like.

Example: "*Draw the drapes,*" Kai said as he signed, making an outline of curtains in the air with his spread fingers, bringing them out, then down. Next, he held his hands up, flat, palms out, bringing them together so his thumbs touched.

2- Descriptions of body language/facial expression. ASL is a visual language, and a lot of its grammar and meaning comes from body language and facial expression (these are called Non-manual Signals, or NMS). For example, eyebrow position can tell you if you're asking an open-ended question, a yes/no question, or the topic of a sentence. Body position can indicate you're asking a question, you're saying "and," and more. Negating a sentence or sign can be as simple as signing while shaking your head. Expressing a modifier (as in, something is "really" or "very") can be done through facial expressions and the way you sign a particular word. I'll do my best to convey this information in the descriptions from time to time (especially when important), but you might also see me use **bold** to indicate a modifier when writing in English, or an exclamation point after a glossed word to illustrate the same point.

Example: "*MAN VERY-TALL, WHEELCHAIR, HAIR YELLOW!, EYES BLUE!*" or "*I **really** want to learn,*" Renee signed, doing her best to put her emphasis on the 'want' to show how much she wanted to learn.

3—English. This is what you'll see most, especially for longer conversations, because it's just easier for the reader. I recognize that English is a denser language (in terms of its lexicon) than ASL. I also recognize that some words in English are the same, yet are represented by different signs in ASL depending on meaning/context (like "love" and "like," for example). However, I'm not going to stress too badly over things like "there is no sign for ____" - because a single sign can have a lot of equivalent meanings in English,

some signs are modified with intent or mouth morphemes (how you move your mouth) to give shades of meaning (ex: the sign for *need*, *must*, and *should* is the same depending on how you sign it and what your mouth does when you do), and some words are fingerspelled (or described/explained with gestures) if no sign exists. If I feel like pointing out the differences between English and ASL are important, I will, but keep that in mind. **ASL, because it is another language, will always be represented in italics.**

Example: "*I don't know. Maybe someday,*" Kai signed.

I could have easily glossed that, too, but reading a lot of glossing can be cumbersome, especially if you're not familiar with ASL, so I try to limit when I use that.

4 - Visual descriptions of ASL storytelling. Along these lines, I'll try to convey the visual nature of ASL as much as possible. Part of what makes writing ASL in English so difficult is a lot of information is portrayed in ASL in a way that you can't fully convey in English. I'll do my best to try to make this come through in the text whenever possible, to give you a better sense of what a particular conversation would look like.

Example: "*Besides, Megan has a thing for strays, so you won't be the only one there besides us.*" He indicated Megan's affinity for those without families to spend the holiday with by first signing *MY HOUSE*, then using a classifier for a "person" (the handshape for "D," index finger standing up) with his left hand, moving it around in front of him in a semicircle, while he used his right hand to "pluck" them in the sign for *pick/find* toward the space where he'd drawn his house earlier, as if she were literally plucking strays up and putting them in their house.

5- Glossing. It is possible to write ASL—kind of. It's called "glossing." You use a capital English word to represent the sign. If the sign encompasses more than one English word, you hyphenate, like *DON'T-KNOW* or *DON'T-WANT* or *CLOSE-DOOR*. In true glossing, you have a line above the words that will indicate NMS.

Example: The English sentence "I don't understand" could be glossed this way:

_____N
UNDERSTAND.

Where the "N" above means you negate the sentence by shaking your head and frowning.

This is a simplification. True glossing can get *very* complicated.

Because, as I mentioned above, glossing can hurt readability (and still doesn't

fully capture the visual nature of ASL), I don't want to use it too much. For example, ASL uses a very different word order than English; the topic usually comes first, adjectives usually follow the noun, and question words are at the end, rather than the beginning, of most sentences. Additionally, concepts like "because" are usually framed in rhetorical questions, so the English sentence "I'm going to the store because I needed milk" might be said in ASL like, "*STORE I GO WHY? NEED MILK.*"

Also, in true glossing, you indicate a fingerspelled word with the prefix "fs," so: "*fs-MUTE*" would mean that the word was spelled out. I'm going to stick to the more Englishy convention of either saying in the tag that a word or words were fingerspelled, or write them like this: "*M-U-T-E*" as I think that's more readily understandable by more readers.

Also, keep in mind that some words are fingerspelled instead of signed for emphasis. I'll try to make a note of this whenever it happens in the text.

Additionally, I'm not an expert on glossing, and true glossing is impossible to format on the blog. Mostly, I'll use glossing if I want to be clear what version of a sign a character used (like *LEAVE* versus *ABANDON*), or if I want to emphasize the grammatical structure of an ASL sentence as opposed to its English counterpart.

Example: "If I wanted to ask you your name, I'd do it like this: *YOU NAME WHAT?*"

Some ASL resources:

Signing Savvy

<http://www.signingsavvy.com/>

LifePrint.com

<http://lifeprint.com/>

ASL Pro

<http://aslpro.com/>

Deaf Video TV (Deafie vloggers, including video comments, all in ASL)

<http://deafvideo.tv/>

Appendix IV: A Brief Note On Deaf Culture

I am not going to try to do justice to the complexity of Deaf culture and the Deaf community in only a few sentences, but I wanted to say a few things for clarification purposes.

One of the aspects you'll discover in *In/Exhale* is the sometimes culture clash between the Deaf and hearing communities.

At this point in the story, I haven't discussed terminology directly, so I'll take a quick moment to discuss the difference between "deaf" and "Deaf." The former refers to an inability to hear, whereas the latter refers to culture. Someone can be deaf but not Deaf, and Kai was raised culturally Deaf despite his ability to hear.

To simplify, "Deaf" usually refers to people who use ASL as their primary language and is associated with its own cultural norms that may be very different from those of the surrounding hearing community.

Some Deaf Culture resources:

Deaf in America: Voices from a Culture (Padden, Humphries)

Deaf People: Evolving Perspectives from Psychology, Education, and Sociology (Andrews, Leigh, Weiner)

For Hearing People Only: Answers to Some of the Most Commonly Asked Questions about the Deaf Community, Its Culture, and the "Deaf Reality" (Moore)

Train Go Sorry: Inside A Deaf World (Cohen)

**Of course, the best way to learn about Deaf culture is to go into the Deaf community and learn first-hand!*

Appendix V: A Brief Note on the US Foster Care System

I've had a few people ask me about how accurate the portrayal of the US foster care system is in *In/Exhale*. Like most things in the story, I do my best to use a foundation of reality and then take the story from there.

One of the questions I've been asked relates to Kai being separated from his siblings, a plot point integral to the story. Firstly, one must take into account that Kai was in the system in the '80s and '90s, twenty to thirty years ago, and things have changed since then. For one thing, most programs do make a concerted effort to keep siblings together, even if one of those siblings has a disability. The modern system has also increasingly moved away from orphanages, group homes, and institutions toward more family-oriented settings. Still, it wasn't uncommon in the past for children with disabilities to be relegated to institutions like County House. If you're curious about what life was like in an institution for disabled kids, you should read [Smart Ass Cripple](http://smartasscripple.blogspot.com/) (<http://smartasscripple.blogspot.com/>). The author grew up in a home for disabled children and his posts are hilarious.

Kai's experience with abuse is also based/inspired by fact. Figures state that at least 10% of children in the foster care system are abused, though it's likely actual numbers are much higher than that, especially for children with disabilities. In fact, children with disabilities in the system are 2x more likely to be abused than able-bodied children, and are also 1.5x more likely to be seriously harmed by that abuse. They're also just as likely to suffer sustained abuse greater than two years. In fact, in some states, a child with a disability *has up to a 10x greater chance* of being abused repeatedly (by more than one person!) than an able-bodied child.

Think about that for a minute.

Why such high rates of abuse? Many factors play in, though one sad fact is some foster parents milk the system. Most states offer a higher stipend for caring for children with disabilities, plus state and federal benefits (such as social security) that unscrupulous people can take advantage of.

Additionally, the sad truth is that once a child passes the age of six—six!—the age Kai was when he entered the system—their chance of adoption drops drastically. Most children spend at least two years in foster care; many, their entire childhood (like Kai and David). Children with disabilities have even fewer opportunities for adoption. The reality is that many adoptive parents want infants, not children who already potentially have problems.

As with anything, there are always exceptions. Plenty of foster parents are loving, caring people, and not all looking to adopt discount older children. But, like everything in *In/Exhale*, I like to take elements of truth and weave them into the story, even if overall it's a fictional experience.

Lastly, I wanted to address the issue of aging out. In *In/Exhale*, an important part of Kai, Jon, and David's backstories surrounds graduating out of the foster system. In Season 3, you'll learn more about how David dealt with being suddenly on his own while still in high school, but it's well established that if Jon had not come for Kai, he would have been in serious trouble. Aging out means a child is no longer the state's concern, and these children are kicked out of homes, often with no job, no place to live,

or any kind of healthcare.

The sad fact is that element of *In/Exhale* is 100% inspired by reality. According to statistics, 51% of children who age out are unemployed. Sixty-five percent age out without anywhere to live, and in some areas as much as 40% of those living in homeless shelters are former foster children. Additionally, the majority of children with disabilities graduate the system without any access to services or healthcare.

In fact, the charity One Simple Wish was founded to help children transition from foster care to adulthood by providing support services, mentoring, and more. You can check out their programs on their website, <http://onesimplewish.org>.

So yes, I have taken some liberties with *In/Exhale*, but in general, Kai's and David's experiences are inspired by fact.

A few resources on the US foster care system and abuse:

Children's Rights (general info) – <http://childrensrights.org>

US Department of Health & Human Services (dense, but interesting) - https://www.childwelfare.gov/can/statistics/stat_outOfHome.cfm

“A Case For Action For Children and Youth With Disabilities in Foster Care” – a PDF article in cooperation between Children's Rights and United Cerebral Palsy which outlines specifically how abuse is greater for children with disabilities - http://www.childrensrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2008/06/forgotten_children_children_with_disabilities_in_foster_care.pdf

Appendix VI: Jonesville Memorial Hospital Floor Guide

This guide is to give you a rough idea of where you'll find what in the main building of JMH, in case you're that kind of detail-oriented person.

-----15-----
Administration

-----14-----
Psychiatric Unit

-----13-----
Secondary Cafeteria
Chapel

-----12-----
Oncology

-----11-----
Operating Rooms (OR)
Recovery
Surgical ICU (SICU)

-----10-----
Intermediate Care Unit (aka Step-Down Unit, SDU)

-----9-----
Medicine (Outpatient)

-----8-----
Medicine (Inpatient)

-----7-----
Cardiology
Cardiac Care Unit (CCU)

-----6-----
Pulmonology
Respiratory Care Unit (RCU)

-----5-----
Medicine ICU
Neurology

-----4-----

Maternity
Nursery
Neonatal ICU (NICU)

-----3-----

Pediatrics
Pediatric Intensive Care Unit (PICU)

-----2-----

Main Cafeteria
Long-term Care Unit (LTCU)
Rehabilitation Inpatient Unit

-----1-----

Lobby - Gift shop - Pharmacy - Starbucks
Emergency Room (ER)
Radiology
Outpatient Services
Rehabilitation Center (separate building)

-----B1-----

Pathology
Morgue

-----B2-----

Records

-----B3-----

Utilities

Other Titles by Chie Alemán

In/Exhale: Season One

UnConventional

About The Author

Chie Alemán has lived all over the US, though in many ways, New Orleans will always be home. Her work explores themes of family, personal responsibility, and identity, often pulling from her cultural background as the daughter of Cuban immigrants. She is particularly drawn to portraying unique characters, who, despite their disease or disability, are still interesting and sympathetic individuals deserving of love like anyone else. She currently resides in Houston with her husband and four crazy Chihuahuas.

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