



NEXHALE

Season One

Chie Alemán

Copyright © 2014 by Chie Alemán.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

Cover Design Copyright © 2014 by Chie Alemán
All images and fonts used are part of the public domain.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

This work is provided free of cost in ebook form as a courtesy to my readers. Please do not disrespect me or my writing by using any of my material without contacting me first.

Chie Alemán
[@ChieAleman](https://www.instagram.com/ChieAleman)
<http://chiealeman.com>
chiealeman@gmail.com

In/Exhale: Season One

by: Chie Alemán

Author's Note

In/Exhale started out in the mid-90s, when I created a fictional town called Jonesville in northern Iowa and populated it. At first, the story existed only in my head, and it wasn't until about 1995-6 that I started writing it down. I got a word processing program that had a journaling function, and since I never put much credence in writing the events of my own life, I started fictional journals for the three main characters (at the time): Kai, Jon, and Becca.

Eventually, as the story progressed and my writing skills improved, I moved away from the first-person journaling format and started writing in third-person. However, I kept the dating style from the original incarnation, setting each experience in a specific day and time.

As a result, the characters of the *In/Exhale* world have existed in my head in one incarnation or another for almost twenty years. I never shared their world or the characters with anyone, as it always seemed too personal. While the story was fictional, in some ways it was journaling for me, a way to work out whatever experiences, frustrations, or emotional issues I was dealing with in my own life at the time.

I was also hesitant because the main character, Kai Fox, suffers from two fictional diseases: FS and MLS. (You can read more about these in the appendices.) I had always been worried about how this would be received. Originally, the diseases were fictional because of my limited knowledge and to give me the freedom to take the story where I wanted it to go. However, as my medical knowledge has grown, I've done my best to make the two diseases as believable and "realistic" as possible while still keeping true to the roots of the story.

A few years ago, I took a leap and shared certain sections of the story with some of my friends and their feedback encouraged me to finally bring Kai and his friends into the public eye. I decided to go back in time to 2000, where a major chapter of Kai's life begins, and rewrite, filling in the holes in the storyline and in many ways experiencing the characters as if they were new.

Because of the "daily" format and its continuous, sometimes melodramatic storyline, I decided to begin posting the story online as a kind of prose soap opera, with each weekly installment acting as one "episode," and having a collection of episodes comprise a season. As I write this, *In/Exhale* has completed two seasons and will have a third starting in mid- to late 2014.

Because the story is complex, often a single day will be too long to post in one installment online, so some days are divided into parts, comprising different episodes. However, for the sake of this ebook, I have simply divided by days, with no break points for episodes for smoother reading.

Also, keep in mind that because I'm a compulsive editor, the version of each day/episode included here may vary slightly from the online version, and there may be minor proofreading errors.

Remember that *In/Exhale* is not a novel, even if I've presented it here in a novel-like format for easier reading. Each season has its own arc, but it won't be the cut-and-dry "beginning, middle, end" that you would expect from a traditional format. Instead, think of it more like a TV show.

I hope you enjoy *In/Exhale* as much as I have living it, creating it, and sharing it with you.

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.

-Chie Alemán

August 21, 2000

"Do you have your cell phone?" Jon stood in front of Kai in the small kitchen of their shared apartment, stuffing papers into his briefcase, his white coat bunched up on the counter beside it, his slightly damp medium-length wheat-colored hair uncombed and frazzled.

"Yes," Kai sighed, leaning on his crutches. Unlike his brother, who always seemed to have his mind occupied, considering his appearance secondary to his work, Kai was dressed neatly in a short-sleeved button-up and jeans, making sure the collar hid the remains of his tracheostomy scar. He wasn't ashamed of it, like his other scars, but it was ugly and a bit intimidating and college was supposed to be a fresh start. He didn't need everyone immediately zoning in on the pink navel-like scar on his neck and asking questions.

"And your inhaler?"

Kai shifted his weight and tried not to sigh again. He knew his brother worried, and he was just trying to tell Kai without so many words that he loved him and hoped his first day of classes went well.

"I haven't had an attack since the transplant," Kai reminded him.

"I know," Jon said, distracted for a moment as if he'd forgotten what he was doing. After a pause, he shrugged, shut his briefcase, and slipped the strap onto his shoulder. "But you're the only patient we know of with confirmed FS who had a successful lung transplant of any kind. It's impossible to say how your body will react." Jon snatched his white coat and flung it over his shoulder. "I'd just feel better if you had your rescue inhaler with you, just in case."

Kai adjusted his weight, slipped his right hand off the grip and pushed it into his pocket, pulling out an inhaler just enough for Jon to see it, before shoving it back in. "I'll be fine, Jon."

Jon frowned, his thin lips pursing together, but he nodded.

"I'd tell you to relax, but I don't think you understand the meaning of the word."

Jon's frown deepened a bit, and he managed to free one hand enough to place it on Kai's shoulder. He could hardly believe his little brother was actually taller than him by an inch or two. Glancing at Kai's crutches, he added, "I know Troy said you could go without those for a while, but don't overdo it, OK?"

Kai sighed. "Yes, *Dad*. I promise. If you promise to make sure you eat." It was Kai's turn to frown as he noticed Jon was leaving the apartment yet again without eating or even drinking anything. "Doctors really do make the worst patients," Kai muttered as Jon headed out the door.

"I'll probably be home late, but page me if you need anything," Jon called just before Kai heard the front door slam.

It wasn't his first time on campus, or even his first college class, but a flutter of nervousness still floated in his stomach as Kai pulled into the closest available handicapped space to Thomas Hall, where he had his first two classes. Kai sat in his car for a moment, the engine tinkling as it cooled down, his eyes shut, focusing. This time would be different, he told himself. *He* was different. As if to remind himself of the fact, he took a slow deep breath, letting it out easily. Kai opened his eyes one by one, noticing the students, all of them younger than him, milling about, bags slung over shoulders as they hurried off to their classes, and glanced over at his crutches. Troy, his physical therapist, had encouraged him to spend a few hours a day without them, and Kai was anxious for the anonymity not needing them would bring.

He was old enough now that probably none of the students would know him, and he'd have the chance to make new friendships, he hoped. The new start he desperately needed. Still, he hadn't yet tried to manage much without them outside of the apartment, and it made him nervous to leave them in the car. Kai sucked in a satisfyingly easy breath, grabbed his bag, and pushed the door open.

Jonesville University had a large campus, spread out over miles, with lots of space between buildings, with plenty of parking nestled around each one. Due to the intensity of the cold winters, and partially because the campus had expanded gradually over the years, it was a necessity for many students to bike or even drive to each class, and Kai was grateful for that fact, knowing he could never manage on his feet for long, especially if he couldn't rest in between.

The buildings of Jonesville U had been built over the years; the oldest, from the founding of the university, were a more traditional style—serious stone buildings that spoke to tradition and expectation of what a college should look like. The newer buildings ran the gamut from artistic and modern to plain and efficient. Thomas Hall had been built only ten years previously, and was five stories of square red brick that had little architectural character to its many square windows. But new meant the elevator almost never broke down, and didn't take an eternity to take you from the first to fifth floor, unlike Jones Hall, one of the oldest buildings on campus, named after Horatio Jones who'd founded the town two centuries ago.

Kai had been relieved he didn't have any classes there this year as he carefully entered the building, glad that no one seemed to notice him, even if he did have a slight limp from his weaker left leg. He'd hoped Troy could help him with it, but he knew it was gone. It was a small price to pay, and the AFO he wore helped. And it didn't really matter, if he could slip into a crowd like this and go completely unnoticed. It pushed a smile to his face as he stepped into the elevator. He hit the button for three and watched as a few other students mingled in. Freshmen, they looked like. They were only four years younger than him, but they looked so youthful. Kai sighed and leaned against the side of the car as the doors shut and they began to rise. Had he ever looked that young?

It only took a few minutes to reach the third floor, and Kai shuffled out behind a couple of cute girls. He wondered if he could ever bring himself to get close to someone again. Not just in bed—he had Nikki for that, and what they had was incredible—in fact, he planned on seeing her tonight after his classes. But growing up as an orphan in a home, he'd always dreamed of having a family someday. A wife whom he loved, and who loved him, some kids. Most of his life that had been as big a fantasy as flying, but then he'd met Becca. Becca, who he'd thought could maybe be the one, who would stick with him despite everything.

Kai felt his hands balling into fists as he wandered down the hall for his first class. *New start, new start*, he thought, fighting his fingers' instinct to sign the words as he finally found room 312, shuffling in behind a few other students.

Room 312 was one of the large auditorium-style lecture halls on campus, with stadium seating leading up in tiered rows, divided into three sections by stairs. It was still early; class didn't start for at least another twenty minutes, so plenty of seats lay empty. Kai glanced at the front row, where there were gaps obviously intended for wheelchairs and sighed despite himself before turning his attention to the stairs and the far top back of the room. Troy had told him to push himself as far as he reasonably could, and although he had avoided stairs as a general rule for most of his life, he decided to give them a try.

Without his crutches or a handrail it was harder than it could have been, and halfway up Kai debated stopping. But he'd been trapped at the bottom of rooms like this so often in his life, and the thrill of his breath coming so easily even as his exhalations and inhalations grew quicker and shallower, encouraged him to keep going.

When he finally reached the top, he collapsed in the first available seat, staring down and reveling in his achievement. He knew it was silly, and it wasn't like he'd ever seen a mountain, but he realized this must be what it felt like to climb one and look down, admiring the view, knowing what you did to earn it. It wasn't the most practical seat for various reasons, and Kai wondered to himself if they had large lecture halls like this at Gallaudet, and if so, if they had some kind of camera and projection system so you could still see the professor's signs even from far up in the back row.

Although Kai had grown used to spoken language by now, and had even come to appreciate the benefits of not needing to use your hands to speak, he missed ASL terribly. Jon had lost most of his ASL fluency over the years they were apart, and Kai hadn't really kept in touch with David, his old roommate from County House, or any of the other kids he'd gone to school with before the state had forced him into the hearing high school. There'd been a few times while he was recovering after his transplant he'd considered looking David up, but that was part of his old life. Maybe if he were able to graduate he could become a teacher at the deaf school here—or maybe even somewhere else. The thought of leaving the town—the state—was exciting. Kai had lived in Jonesville his entire life, and although he loved the place—it was home—he wondered sometimes about the rest of the country, the rest of the world. Jon had traveled with his adopted father, had gone to college at some fancy school on the East coast, but he'd still come back home. And Kai knew, even if he somehow managed to leave Jonesville, that Jon never would leave again.

Kai was so lost in his own thoughts he hadn't realized a girl had sat down beside him. It was her smell that got him first; one of the things Kai had enjoyed most since he'd been extubated post-transplant was getting his sense of smell back. She smelled delicate and floral; he couldn't quite place the exact scent, but it was subtle and lovely. A body spray, perhaps, instead of a perfume. Certainly not pungent enough to provoke an attack if this had been before.

When he turned his head, he realized she'd been staring at him, and for a moment, he grew nervous. Had his collar dipped or come undone and she could see his trache scar? He knew it was kind of creepy looking, especially if you'd never seen anything like it before. Reflexively, he brought his fingers to his neck, and maybe she sensed she'd been staring, because she blinked, shook her head, and smiled.

"Sorry." She cleared her throat. "I'm Renee Poche," she said. Her voice was soft and sweet like her scent; clearly, she wasn't from the Midwest.

"Kai Fox," he replied, offering his hand, reluctantly dropping it from his throat.

She smiled. God, she had a beautiful smile. She was petite; it was hard to tell how tall now that they were sitting, but it was yet another indication that she wasn't from around here. Her hair was dark—almost black—and curly. Kai didn't know much about women, but it looked natural, her thick tendrils perfectly framing her face in a managed chaos he found entrancing despite the fact that Becca also had curly hair.

"That's an unusual name. You a freshman?" She asked as she pulled a notebook and pen out of her bag.

Kai flushed slightly, realizing how silly it was for his body to react this way. "Yeah." He couldn't manage to say more than that.

She flipped her desk out and laid her supplies on it, smiling the whole time. "I'm an architecture student, so my program's five years. I'm a second year right now. But I put off most of my core classes last year, so here I am."

Kai grinned despite himself. He wanted to touch her curls, feel their softness on his skin, never stop smelling her unique floral scent. His stomach churned and he knew immediately he wanted to know more about her—everything. Suddenly, his chest grew tight, and his face paled. No. This hadn't happened since. . . . Reflexively, he dropped his hand to his right pocket, feeling the inhaler beneath his palm.

"You OK?" Her face was so concerned and sincere, and she'd reached for him, placing a warm, tiny hand on his arm.

He stared at it, forced himself to take a few slow breaths, realizing he was OK. Maybe it was just nerves. How was it that this girl he hardly knew, whom he'd just met, could make him feel so off kilter? He eased his lips into a smile to reassure her and give backing to his words.

"Yeah. Sorry." He swallowed. "First day jitters, I guess," he added with a bit of a blush.

She laughed, a musical, lilting sound that made him grateful for his hearing. "So what classes are you taking this semester?"

Kai thought a moment. "World History I, English Comp, Intro to Philosophy, Intro to Psych." The professor had arrived and was setting up for the lecture, writing "World History I, H101, MILLER," on the white board.

"Cool," she said with that same warm smile. "Who do you have for Comp and Philosophy?"

Kai tilted his head, thinking for a moment. "I think it's Boer and . . . Mc-something."

"McAllen?"

Kai nodded. His left calf had begun to spasm slightly, enough to be painful but not so much he couldn't ignore it. "Yeah, I think that's right."

"Me too," she said. "I mean, I have those same classes. We should sit together in them, too."

Kai felt a warm flutter in his stomach. "I'd like that."

Renee looked as if she were about to say something else when the professor cleared his throat and began to speak.

"Welcome, ladies and gentleman, to World History I. This course will fulfill your common curriculum requirement, but only if you study hard and pass my exams."

Kai knew he should be taking notes, but he'd nearly forgotten himself, so entranced by Renee, so he fumbled for his bag to grab a notebook and his own pen. It could have been his imagination, but she seemed to be casting glances at him every few minutes, smiling the entire time.

"Many people ask, 'why study history?' Of course, the easy answer is 'because then we're doomed to repeat it.' However, I think life is far more complicated than that. I believe it's more that the past, however behind us it may seem, is never truly gone. It is always a part of us, and as much as we may like to forget that, not only can't we, we mustn't."

Kai was grateful once again that Nikki lived in a first-floor apartment. Renee apparently preferred the back row in every class, which had meant far more stairs than Kai had anticipated, and his legs were sore. He couldn't decide which one ached more, his weaker, left leg, or his stronger, right leg for compensating for the left. He leaned heavily on his crutches as he waited for Nikki to answer.

The door opened, and Nikki stood, one hip cocked out, wearing nothing but boyshort panties and a tight-fitting babydoll tee that stopped a few inches above her navel, revealing her delicious flat belly. She smiled at him, licked her lips, then stepped back to allow him to enter.

"I thought you were done with those," she said, sauntering in.

Kai watched her move, the way she purposefully exaggerated the sway of her hips for his benefit, the way her heart-shaped ass fit so perfectly in those panties. "I am, mostly. But I went all day without them."

Nikki turned around, fingers resting on her chin, her index rubbing over her lips as she looked at him, appraising him.

"Besides, I thought you liked them," Kai said, his breath starting to come fast and short as he felt blood rush to his cock. Nikki could eye-fuck him like no woman he'd ever known.

She tilted her head and grinned, but said nothing, slinking toward him instead.

Nikki lived in a simple studio apartment, furnished with mere basics—a mattress and boxspring, a small table and chairs, a 13" TV, and little else. The first time Kai had visited her here, he'd remarked at the sparsity; Nikki, despite the fact that she worked full time at the diner, had always struck him as someone material. Instead, Nikki had pointed out that the only thing a girl really needs is food, fucking, and, well, occasionally Oprah. She had a sense of humor, yet something else Kai found so attractive about her.

His cock throbbed as she crossed her arms and pulled her shirt over her head, revealing her breasts, two large stripper-quality orbs still perky due to her youth, with two pinkish purple

areolas and long nipples that begged to be sucked. Kai's legs ached, and he glanced over at the bed, but somehow felt trapped by her spell, unable to move.

"I do," she finally said in answer to his earlier statement, smoothing her hands on the metal of his crutches and sinking down to her knees in front of him, beginning to undo the belt and button of his jeans.

"Nikki . . ." he started to protest, as she jerked his jeans open. "Nikki, I'm ti—" But his voice immediately cut off as she took him in her mouth, sucking softly, gently, urging him to harden against her tongue. She gave him a gentle push so that he was leaning against the wall as she eased his jeans and boxers down farther, better exposing him.

Nikki caressed the bottom of his cock, which had swollen to his full length in her mouth, while she eased a hand around his balls, smoothing them with her fingers. Kai let his head fall back against the wall and his eyes closed, suddenly forgetting the ache in his legs, forgetting everything. Nikki had a way of doing that—of making everything disappear, even if only for an instant—so that you lived in the moment. And this moment was incredible. Her mouth was so warm and tight yet soft; she knew exactly when to stroke with her tongue and when to suck, when to take his full length and swallow against the head, when to ease him in and out with little flicks against his slit.

She pulled off with a long lick, then grinned up at him, smoothing her tongue over her lips seductively. "Feeling better?"

Kai nodded, unable to form words. The cool air teased the delicate skin of his cock, bringing him back to reality for the moment as he remembered his arms still rested in the cuffs of his crutches, even if the wall was supporting him now. He watched as Nikki carefully removed one, then the other, smoothing her hand over his forearms so lightly it brought up gooseflesh, sending a tingle of electricity up his spine and making his cock jerk and leak in anticipation.

Kai vaguely heard the sound of his crutches being set aside, and now that his hands were free, he brought his right to his cock, his erection painful with need, but Nikki batted his hand away, shaking her head. He let out a faint whine of complaint, but let her push him away, her hot breath teasing him.

"I don't know how someone this big can be so . . . adorable," Nikki said in a husky voice, inching her fingers over the skin of his thighs, grazing his balls, up his belly, sliding under his shirt. Standing at full height, Kai was nearly 6'4", just slightly taller than his older brother Jon. And now that he'd had time to put on weight and muscle post-transplant, he was a healthy 200 pounds, his broad shoulders well muscled and strong, making him seem more imposing than his naturally slight figure.

His only response was a grunt as she took his balls in her mouth, rolling them over with her tongue, sucking playfully with a chuckle, the vibration of which made an electric pulse of sensation flow up from them to his dick and settle somewhere in the base of his spine. Nikki wasn't just good at this, she enjoyed it, smoothing her hands on his thighs, tickling her fingers back to the sensitive skin behind his sac, forcing him to press his shoulders against the wall to keep himself from sinking into the ground.

He watched as she pulled away with a grin, lapping at the golden hair that coated his groin, just a shade darker than the delightful fine mop that fell down past his ears on each side of his head. Nuzzling him with her nose and the soft heat of her breath, she eased her hands up his legs, under his shirt, fingering his firm stomach, searching for the scars she knew were there, one long pink, waxy mark in the center of his chest, and two smaller shifts in skin beneath his pecs. His cock pressed at her face anxiously with each shuttering breath, and she was forced to drop her hands so she could brace him as she took it deep again, swallowing once and making him giggle and moan.

Nikki was the first person that wasn't a medical professional—his brother included—who he'd let see his transplant scars. It wasn't so much that they embarrassed him; Kai had been forced to abandon that emotion years ago. Perhaps it was more the fact that as long as they

remained hidden, with his new ability to breathe so easily, he could pretend, if only to himself, that he were normal. Or at least as close to normal as he could be.

Fuck, that feels good, he thought, closing his eyes as Nikki worked her magic, cradling his balls in one palm while she used her other hand to guide him in and out of her mouth at an increasing pace, adjusting the suction and the caress of her tongue until he felt his stomach tensing and his nerves ignite in a combination of numbness and electricity, a feeling he knew well from oxygen deprivation but which, in this context, was anything but frightening.

Moaning and humming to increase the sensation as she moved faster, taking him deeper, letting the head hit the roof of her mouth, Kai pressed his hands back against the wall to help keep himself upright as his hips jerked reflexively into her mouth, a surge of heat flowing out of him as he came hard into the back of her throat. She pressed her hands against his thighs to help keep him upright as she swallowed, sucking gently on the tip, lapping at the last of his come with her tongue before pulling back.

"God, how is it you taste so fucking good? You're sweeter than most guys," she said, pushing herself to her feet, easing his pants and underwear back up his hips before wrapping herself around him so they were both leaning against the wall.

Kai was too lost in his orgasm, eyes glazed, heart slowing, to let the reference to Nikki's experience bother him. He knew he was far from her first; it wasn't like she was his, either, and they had no illusions of being more than a fun fuck. After the disasters of Diane and Becca—especially Becca—he wasn't ready for anything serious, and Nikki had made it pretty clear she wasn't interested in an emotional relationship. Yet it still bothered him on a certain level to know that what they had wasn't special. Not special in the "let's get married sense"; yes, Kai wanted that someday, with the right girl—but more like the feeling that what they shared together was unique to the two of them. Maybe it was. Rather than being turned off by his scars or his crutches, Nikki seemed to embrace them, realizing they were as much a part of him as anything else.

"You're exhausted," she said finally, and he heard a note of warmth in her voice he hadn't noticed her use before. "Come on."

Expecting her to hand him his crutches, he was surprised when she helped him hobble the short distance to her bed, easing him onto the mattress with a unexpected tenderness. She was much stronger than she looked despite her thin frame and the fact that the top of her head barely cleared his shoulders when he stood at full height. With a sigh, he let himself fall back, willing himself to stay awake and not succeeding very well as his eyelids grew heavy and nearly impossible to keep open.

Wordlessly, Nikki eased off his shoes and jeans, working quickly but delicately. Once he was half naked, she turned to the ankle brace he wore on his left foot, tearing off the velcro so carefully that the ripping made only the faintest sound—or maybe sleepiness was dulling his senses. She gripped his calf and carefully eased his foot out of the orthotic, removed his sock, and set them aside with his clothes. Her fingers worked into the tight, sore gastrocnemius muscle, then cradled the arch of his foot, soothing it, knowing the muscles and tendons tended to seize there, especially after a long day on his feet. The tenderness of her touch felt more like a wife than a sexual partner, especially since he knew post-release it was meant to comfort him and not arouse.

"That feels good," he muttered, keeping his eyes shut, letting his breathing down shift. Even though more than a year had passed since his transplant, it still felt strange to not have to struggle for breath, for his chest to fill easily and release with even less effort.

After a moment, she shifted her attention to his right leg, massaging his calf and feet carefully before finally crawling onto the bed beside him, pulling a quilt over them and snuggling up against him, her arm draped over his chest, snaked up through the bottom of his shirt, fingering his scars and pecs, gentle, soft strokes of warm flesh against flesh.

"Why don't you stay," she whispered, her breath hot and tickling against his neck. "I can order a pizza."

He shifted his head to kiss the top of hers, where her hair met her forehead, reaching up to smooth some of it. He wasn't sure what exact color or texture Nikki's hair was naturally; she seemed to be in a constant state of flux as to its style and shade. Right now it was cropped short and straight, angled toward her face so that it lengthened as it approached her chin, dark brown with severe platinum highlights interrupting at intervals. He wondered if the brown was close to her natural hue based on the trimmed landing strip nestled above her slit.

He sighed into her hair, inhaling her scent, a mixture of fruity shampoo and body spray; Nikki always seemed to smell sweet, even after sex. "You know I can't."

Nikki sighed angrily but didn't move. "You're twenty-two years old. I think you're old enough for a sleepover."

He couldn't resist a chuckle despite her annoyed tone. "True. But Jon'd worry."

After aging out of the orphanage he'd called home most of his life, County House, Kai had moved in with his older brother, Jon, a physician-in-training at Jonesville Memorial. Separated since their parents had died years earlier, the two brothers were anxious to reconnect. Unfortunately, it wasn't long after that Kai's health began to nosedive as his lungs rapidly began to fail. Last year, just when they'd just about given up hope, Kai had matched with a cadaveric double-lung, receiving a transplant that had saved and changed his life.

Kai had spent nearly a year recovering, and although his health had improved to the point at which he could afford his own place, he'd decided to stay in the apartment he shared with his brother, partially hoping to make up for some of the time they'd lost over the decade they'd been apart.

Nikki laughed, a harsh exhalation of air. "You're a big boy. Besides, it's not like he's ever there, anyway."

It was true; Jon was a notorious workaholic, dedicated with a passionate intensity to his work as a clinician and researcher for FS, the respiratory disease that had forced Kai into needing a new set of lungs. Kai sighed against her again, debating about how nice it would be to take Nikki up on her offer, knowing she'd do more than warm his bed before the sun rose the next morning. But reality soon set in.

"I can't. I don't have my meds with me."

Post-transplant, Kai had been put on a litany of drugs, half to stave off rejection, the other half to ward off the side effects of the powerful medications that kept his immune system in check. Part of the first months of recovery had simply been adjusting the dosages of the various immunosuppressants, trying to find a balance between maintaining the stability of his new lungs and keeping the powerful side effects—among them severe nausea and vomiting—at bay. He was stable now, and grateful he hadn't lost his hair, but he couldn't afford to miss a single dose of any of the important drugs, which he took twice a day, everyday. Nikki knew this, but still, she clung to him, wrapping a leg around him tightly.

He laughed, shifting a hand until it cupped her breast, his thumb brushing gently over her nipple. She gasped with the sensation, which made him smile.

"I'm not leaving yet, though," he said, leaning in to tease her ear between his teeth. He felt her hand pressing against his chest, pushing him away, and frowned.

"Let's nap. I want you fresh and ready for me," she said with a glint in her eye, licking her lips. "Besides, you're fucking beautiful when you sleep."

He laughed, looking at her, amazed by how sexy she was, by how sexy she thought he was, and let his body sink into the bed. He was tired, and it didn't take long for him to give into her suggestion and slip into sleep.

Nikki didn't sleep long. After only a few minutes, she woke, feeling the warmth of Kai's body near hers, the sound of his breathing—not quite a snore, but not quite normal, either. The only

light filtered in from the window across the room; it was barely enough to illuminate his face as he slept on his side, facing her, one knee slightly tucked up. She watched him for several minutes; she hadn't lied when she'd told him he was beautiful when he slept. He really was, with his gold hair falling across his face, his lips slightly parted, his long fingers resting beside his stomach.

She wanted to reach over, stroke her hand over his body, a light touch over the skin of his arm. To use her fingers to ease the lock of hair behind his ear and kiss him there, in the soft spot along the nape of his neck. She even wanted to kiss his trache scar, because it was part of him, and not nearly as ugly and repulsive as he imagined it to be. It was a sign of where he had been and where he was now, and a part of her hated that he felt the need to cover it. A guy she'd dated had been a body modification artist and one day when she'd been flipping through his portfolio she'd seen a strange picture. It almost looked like a belly button piercing at first, but as she continued to flip, she realized it was a woman's neck. It was the strangest and yet most beautiful thing she'd ever seen, and when she'd asked her—well, boyfriend wasn't really the right term, was it?—about it, he'd explained it was a tracheostomy scar, healed from having a tube in her neck so she could breathe, and she was proud of it, so she'd had him pierce it for her.

Nikki sighed, resisting the urge to trace a finger down Kai's chin toward his neck, and decided to ease out of bed instead, pulling on a shirt and slipping quietly into the kitchen a few feet away. As noiselessly as she could, she filled her kettle and set it to boil, standing beside it so she could catch it right before the whistle sounded. Why did she like to do this? Watch him sleep? She wondered to herself as she fished out two mugs and her box of teabags from the counter above and to the left of the stove. Normally she was the type of girl who fucked a guy quick and left, or kicked him out. Not that she usually had to tell them to go, because she normally picked the type of guys who weren't interested in staying. But Kai was different. She'd known that the first time she'd seen him come into the diner, walking stiffly with his crutches, his strong arms bearing most of his weight as he eased toward the counter to wait for Becca.

It wasn't just his walk that made him different from the string of bikers and losers she normally fucked. They always had a kind of carefree arrogance, like they knew they were the best fucks in the world, even if they had a pinky dick they wouldn't know what to do with if it had the directions tattooed on it. She remembered watching Kai as she'd refilled coffees of the patrons on the far end of the counter, watching him talk to one of the older waitresses. He had a confidence to him, certainly; she could see that clearly by the way he flirted with Marge, causing her to blush since a twenty-something guy hadn't flirted with her in probably thirty years. But there was a kindness, too; not just because he was humoring a middle-aged waitress, but because the attention he paid to her was obviously not feigned, but genuine, like he honestly believed everyone deserved a little sugar in their coffee, as Marge would have put it. But Nikki saw a shyness, too; she didn't know how someone could be both confident and shy at the same time, but Kai was. Not that he was easily embarrassed; it was more reserved than anything else. And she still remembered how his skin had pinked when she'd sashayed her way toward him, laying a hand on his thick bicep as she leaned over to offer to refill his cup.

He'd looked up at her with those bright blue eyes, and she'd never imagined getting lost in someone's eyes like that. She'd heard the expression of course, but never believed it. Nikki was the type of person who didn't believe what she couldn't see or witness herself, but his eyes had captured her in that moment, and she knew immediately why Marge had been smiling like a school girl while they talked.

It was those eyes that had prompted Nikki to take her cigarette break a few minutes early when she saw him leave with Becca, to duck out to the alley behind the restaurant, hidden by the dumpster. To hear the end of an argument, voices raised and heated, Becca's angry and hurtful, Kai's strained and wounded. To see Becca storm off toward the parking lot and Kai lean forward, head bent against the wall, his strong shoulders, perfectly framed by his shirt, shuttering.

Every instinct in Nikki's body had told her to turn back, forget the pack of cigarettes clenched in her hand—she'd been meaning to quit anyway, right?—and get back to work. But instead, she'd stepped around the dumpster, one hand in front of her as if she were approaching a wounded stray dog, and she'd spoken to him, asking if he was OK.

He'd turned his head so quickly she'd expected to see anger in his face; instead, she saw those eyes. It could have been a trick of the light, the shadows of the alley, but their color had shifted from the bright, piercing blue of the ocean to something subtler, darker, grayer. And despite her question, neither of them had spoken for what had to be a minute or more, the two of them just looking at each other, as if neither of them understood the English language, and they needed some other form of communication.

Again, instinct kicked in, and Nikki had made a joke, something like, "She's a bitch," and his face had flinched. For an instant, she'd thought he'd grow angry, but instead, he'd smiled, laughing a bit, his eyes lighting, and God, she wanted nothing more in that instant than to press him up against that wall and lick every part of his body. Instead, she'd pulled out her ordering pad and a pen from her apron, had quickly scrawled her name and number, and pressed it into the pocket of his jeans, resisting the urge to linger. Instead, she'd whispered, "If you need a friend," unable to hide the seduction in her tone or eyes as she'd forced herself to turn back, jogging through the door and into the diner.

Nikki heard the gurgle of fast-boiling water and quickly shut off the heat, pouring the hot water onto the teabags in each mug, eyeing the clock to time how long it steeped, looking over at Kai in the darkness, feeling something in the pit of her stomach she didn't recognize, and it scared her. She frowned, concentrated on dipping her teabag, pulling the string up and down to speed the steeping, relieved he hadn't taken her up on her offer to stay. She knew she was crazy. They'd only known each other a few months, and Nikki never asked anyone to stay. That had always been her rule. Her apartment was hers, and hers alone.

He stirred, felt for her in the bed before opening his eyes. "Nikki?"

Even though she knew he probably couldn't make out her expressions in the dim light, she forced a smile. "I made tea. Don't worry; it's decaf."

"Thanks," he said, and she heard the smile in his voice, then saw him lean forward to stretch his legs.

After a few moments, he pulled on his boxers, then found his crutches where she'd left them leaned against the wall, and slipped them on, pulling himself to standing and crossing toward the kitchen, keeping most of his weight off his left leg. She pretended not to notice, and shifted the tea toward him, turning to grab the honey out of the cabinet for him.

He'd sunk down into the chair, cupping the mug in his hands, staring at the liquid as if trying to divine the future from it. She was tempted to make a joke, but he seemed so serious, she couldn't bring herself to disturb his pensive mood, so instead, she plucked the bag out of the tea, upended the honey, and squeezed enough of it into his drink to give her a vicarious toothache.

"Thanks," he said again, grabbing a spoon from the set she kept in a jar on the counter and stirring.

Nikki tasted her tea; she normally drank only coffee, but Kai didn't drink anything caffeinated, and she'd found herself buying and drinking this herbal stuff that tasted more like medicine than a beverage. Maybe that's why Kai put so much honey in it. But like watching him sleep, she found she'd come to enjoy these quiet moments with him, bent over their mugs, steam warming their faces.

"I work the nightshift tomorrow," Nikki said, simply for something to say.

Kai sighed, his shoulders rising toward his ears before slowly falling back down. "I'm sorry," he said softly without looking up from his mug. "I could go home, grab my meds, and come back . . ."

Nikki shook her head, laid a hand on his wrist, forcing another smile. "It's OK. I was being silly. You've got class tomorrow anyway, right? You should go home, relax, and give me a call when you want to see me again." Nikki forced herself to drink some of the tea, hoping its bitterness would erase the taste in her mouth.

Kai's eyes were a blue-gray, his eyebrows slanted above them, his lips pursed together in the beginnings of a frown. "I don't have to leave yet, I mean . . ." He paused. "I don't want to be selfish."

Nikki hadn't had an orgasm today, not that she'd given him the opportunity to give her one, but it made her smile; that was another thing about Kai that made him different from the usual losers she picked up. They watched too many pornos and didn't understand the first thing about proper foreplay or how to get a woman off the right way.

"It's OK. You can make it up to me later," she said with a twinkle in her eye, leaning in to kiss him, their tongues licking across each other. And God, she didn't want to let him go, but she knew she had to.

The words on the chart in front of him started to grow blurry, and Jon began to get that anxious, restless feeling that signaled he was heading for a hypo crash. Annoyed, he sighed and pulled open his top desk drawer, removing a small zippered black case. Setting it on the desk, Jon opened it carefully, removing his glucose monitor, threading a test strip into it before pricking his finger. After over twenty years of this, he barely even felt the lancet, frowning as he squeezed the droplets onto the paper.

While he waited for the reading, he fished a glucose candy out of the same drawer, tapping it lightly on the desktop. His hands were shaking, which didn't help his annoyance, not to mention the fact that Jon's mood always soured when his blood sugar was low. Sometimes he hated being diabetic, even though he'd dealt with it since he was a kid, and it was old hat by now. Jon was like an express train, rolling quickly, focused, and he hated having to stop to do anything, and that included eating, checking his sugar, taking his insulin. It wasn't the disease so much that bothered him but the way it interrupted the flow of his life. Kai suggested it was probably God's way of ensuring Jon ate; Jon had the habit of being so focused on his work he'd skip meals, bad enough for someone with a normally functioning pancreas, potentially fatal for someone with type-I diabetes.

Jon sighed as the reading displayed at last, frowning at the low figure, popping the candy in his mouth and chewing it carefully to give him a temporary boost. He knew it wouldn't be enough; he had to eat something, and soon, but it would at least prevent him from going fully hypo and passing out. As he chewed, he glanced at his watch; his vision was already clearing a bit, and his unease was settling as the sugar entered his blood and fed his starving brain. 11:03 PM. Jon was grateful he didn't need an endocrinologist to get his insulin prescription, so he didn't have to hear a lecture about how bad his hemoglobin a1c numbers were.

Sighing, Jon packed his kit and replaced it in his desk, pushing himself up wearily. He knew he should take better care of himself; if Kai was as neglectful of his body as Jon was of his, Jon would never let his brother hear the end of it. But Taylors were stubborn, and Jon was the worst of them all in some ways. Annoyed that he'd have to leave the rest of the work on his desk for the morning, Jon grabbed his briefcase and keys and headed out of his office toward the employee parking garage.

Jon knew he probably shouldn't have driven himself home, but the candy had boosted him at least temporarily and his apartment was only a five minute trip from the hospital at this time of night. After he was separated from his siblings when their parents died, Jon had spent time in several foster homes before finally—and surprisingly due to his age—being adopted by an older man who'd lost his son only a few years earlier, and Jon had reminded him so much of his dead child he'd immediately taken Jon in as if he were his own.

Although Jon had been initially disturbed a bit, he could commiserate on some level, because he'd never gotten over being separated from his brother, whom he'd taken care of almost as if he were his parent instead of his sibling. And the adoption had been good for Jon; the man was kind and appreciated Jon's natural intelligence and inclination to knowledge. He'd taken Jon away from the small town in which he grew up, steeped with heavy memories of the family he no longer had, and encouraged him to pursue medicine.

But Jon had returned to Jonesville as soon as he could, hoping, praying to find his siblings again—especially Kai—and reconnect. He'd been too late for Sara, the youngest, who he learned had died of leukemia when she was only eleven, ironic, Jon always thought, since she had been a healthy child before their parents were killed. Unlike Kai, who had struggled simply to breathe since the day he was born.

Jon sighed heavily at the memories of cradling his brother to sleep, doing his best to ease Kai's ragged breathing. They'd had a connection, the two of them, that even their parents hadn't understood. Jon had always thought of it as a kind of sixth sense, or perhaps it was simply intuition of the kind you read mothers having for their children, knowing instinctively when something was wrong with one of them. It was a feeling Jon had always carried around with him, even before Kai was born and was still in their mother's womb. Maybe it was simply Jon's natural proclivity toward worry and anxiety, but at least when they were younger, before their parents' deaths, Jon had always seemed to know when Kai would need him and what he needed. Much the way some people could predict and sense a change in the weather, Jon seemed to know his brother.

As Jon pushed his way into the dark apartment, he realized that now that Kai was potentially cured of his FS, and with his MLS not posing anything life-threatening, at least not for several years, he could relax. Kai would be OK. But still, that worrying part of him buzzed, as if it weren't ready to be set aside. Jon tried to convince himself it was simply a matter of habit, that vigilance that Kai would have a major attack or develop a deadly pneumonia at any time a remnant of so many years of tension. But then Jon would reassure himself again that he was simply channeling the risks of being a transplant patient into his usual anxiety, something to fill the void. Kai still had the chance of rejection, of fibrosis, of opportunistic infection, but while these were all real threats, Kai had already survived the most treacherous periods—the first hours post-surgery, the first month, the first three months, the first year, and so far, Kai had been healthier than he'd ever been in his life.

Jon knew he should find all of it comforting, but he couldn't. Instead of being the calm after the storm, it felt more like the eye of the hurricane, the storm behind him, but also swirling dangerously toward him again, threatening to bring even more chaos in its wake. Kai was already asleep; unlike Jon, he was pretty responsible with his health on most days, dutifully taking his medicine on time and resting when his body called for it, but he'd left a note, indicating there was leftover cheese pizza in the fridge if Jon was hungry. Jon laughed as he read the postscript, scribbled in Kai's slanting caps, underlined for emphasis, *CHECK YOUR BLOOD SUGAR*.

Sighing, Jon pulled open a drawer and took out the kit he kept in the kitchen, quickly pricking his finger and waiting for the reading while he grabbed a slice of pizza out of the fridge. He knew the carbs in the pizza would spike his blood glucose, but as low as it was right now, the candy wearing off, he could afford it. Not in the mood to wait for it to heat, he took a bite of the cold slice just at the reading registered.

The apartment was quiet; the only sound the soft hum of the fridge behind him as he chewed on the cold pizza. As he expected, his sugar was low, but not dangerously so, and the pizza would ameliorate that quickly. The silence surrounded him, reminding Jon why, especially while Kai was too sick to live here, that he so often fell asleep at his desk or curled up on the small couch in the corner of his office. Not wanting to risk a full second slice, Jon ate the cheese off instead, then checked his sugar yet again, a yawn stretching his mouth as his exhaustion

began to sink in. He had a presentation to make to some of the medicine residents tomorrow morning. It wasn't officially a Ground Round, especially since some of the internists frowned at Jon's eccentricities, but despite his youth, he was considered one of the best pulmonologists on staff, and pulmonology and critical care were essential parts of the internal medicine curriculum.

Tossing the tester back in its bag, Jon grabbed an insulin syringe from the fridge, lifted his shirt, pinched the skin, and injected himself, remembering he'd have to switch sites for his morning dose. Carefully disposing the needle in the sharps container he kept for the purpose, Jon trudged toward the back hall where their bedrooms were.

As he passed, Jon noticed Kai's door was slightly ajar. He could hear the soft, subtle snore of Kai's breath as he slept; even post-transplant, Kai's breath was noisier than most, although it was low and even and not labored the way it once was. Jon resisted the urge to pop his head in and confirm that Kai was OK. Again, after so many years, it was a struggle for Jon to remember that Kai *was* all right, that perhaps the worst was behind him. Reflexively, Jon pulled his fingers through his hair as he turned toward his own bedroom.

Jon's room was small and neat, *spartan*, Kai had teased him when Jon first brought his brother to the apartment. Kai knew Jon's adoptive father had made some money in various business interests and Jon had been fortunate enough to grow up in a comfortable environment—a far cry from the home where Kai had lived as a child. Still, Jon spent very little time here, and as it was, was a man of few needs and desires.

Jon finally slipped out of his white coat, its pockets heavy with small reference books, hanging it on the coat hanger that stood near his single dresser. He toed off his shoes, nudging them toward the base of the rack, and stared at his face in the mirror for a moment. During the decade of their separation, Jon had hated to look at his reflection, because he saw Kai in it every time he looked, and for years Jon had been unable to determine if Kai was even still alive, so that it was almost as if his brother haunted him in every mirror.

Like Kai, Jon was tall and lean, although his frame was narrower and less muscular, and despite years of insulin treatment for his diabetes, extremely thin. But their faces were nearly identical; Jon's nose perhaps angled a bit sharper, his lips finer, his jaw just a hint more square. Jon's eyes were nearly twins to his brother's as well, but older, faded, less the brilliant Caribbean-sea blue of Kai's and more of a misty gray, with lines of age and worry marking their corners. Like his eyes, Jon's hair was also a softer mirror of Kai's; less golden and more wheaten, like a brilliant fabric left too long in the sunlight, stripping it of its once lustrous color. And though Jon was only eight years older than Kai, he seemed much older, especially when he was tired like this, dark circles under each gray eye, the shade of stubble on his cheeks.

In fact, they looked so much alike, their differences so subtle, that if it weren't for age, they could easily pass as identical twins. As Jon shrugged out of his tie, shirt, and pants, he wondered what the two of them may have been like if things had been different; would Jon have been able to table his anxiety over his brother enough to keep him youthful so that their age difference narrowed, at least in Jon's face? Jon shook his head as he realized Kai's lungs had begun to fail him at just 18, and even their parents, even being together as a family for those twelve extra years, wouldn't have changed that.

Jon collapsed in his bed, pulling the sheets over his naked body as he shut out the light. He disliked teaching residents, mostly because most internists planned on becoming GPs who didn't care about critical care and whose only pulmonary concerns were asthma, occasionally pneumonia or COPD. Or, worse, they had their eyes on a fellowship, something glorified like interventional cardiology and yawned behind their hands when Jon stressed the importance of understanding the pulmonary curves and how that related to proper ventilatory management. As much as he tried to stress the importance of understanding, preventing, and treating ARDS—the subject of tomorrow's lecture—he knew most of them only wanted to know the minimum

required for their boards, content in the fact that someone like him would be managing their patients' respiratory care.

Jon rolled over, a sigh mixed with a groan escaping his lips. Maybe he should take Kai up on his suggestion of a vacation. A few days of relaxation might do him good. Jon laughed as he adjusted his pillow. Relaxation. Kai was right. That was a word Jon had no understanding of.

August 25, 2000

It was Friday night, the first Friday since classes started, and Renee was curled up on the couch with her friend and roommate, Diane. Renee and Diane had met their freshman year, when they'd ended up as roommates after an unfortunate incident that left them both in need of someone to bunk with. They'd become fast friends, and even though Diane had decided to shift her focus to visual art instead of architecture, after their first year, they'd found a cozy two-bedroom not far from campus to share rather than putting up with the meager Jonesville U dorms again.

Diane stuffed a handful of popcorn in her mouth, then set the big plastic bowl between them. Renee was channel surfing, trying to find something for them to watch, but neither of them were really paying attention to the screen.

"We're pathetic. First Friday night of the year and we're in our PJs watching cable when we could be out finding Mr. Right."

Diane was focused on Renee as she spoke, and so she immediately caught the blush that colored Renee's cheeks.

"Ooooh. OK, so now I understand your reluctance to tell me about your first week of classes. Who is he?"

Renee left the TV on a game show rerun and shifted on the couch so she could face Diane better. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Uh huh," Diane said skeptically, grabbing the remote and shutting off the TV with a quick gesture, not bothering to tear her gaze from her friend. "Spill."

Renee sighed and let herself sink into her seat a bit. "His name is Kai. And he's gorgeous."

Diane laughed at the small sigh that escaped Renee's lips. "Wow, one week and you're in love already?"

Renee frowned, but the expression didn't last as she started talking about Kai. "He's a freshman, but I think he's older. He looks older, anyway. Not like most of the other guys in my freshman core classes. Makes me grateful I decided to focus on my major last year instead of my common curriculum classes. He's in every class with me that isn't architecture-based."

"Kai?" Diane said, rolling his name out on her tongue. "That's an unusual name."

"Yeah. I looked it up. It's Japanese. Or Hawaiian. Or Chinese. But he's all Midwestern. Really tall—"

Diane tossed a piece of popcorn at Renee playfully. "Everyone's really tall compared to you."

Renee grabbed the popcorn and popped it in her mouth, then stuck her tongue out. Renee was barely five feet tall, and so she was dwarfed by everyone at Jonesville U, where the average woman was 5'8" and the average guy at least 6'1". Diane wasn't from Jonesville originally; she came from a spot-on-the-map town in South Dakota and had decided to go "south" for school. Part Sioux, she dwarfed Renee by at least six inches when they both stood barefoot, and kept her dark hair braided, although she was immensely jealous of Renee's curls.

"Anyway," Renee said with a mock sneer, "he's totally not like the guys I'm used to from back home. "Tall—"

"You said that already," Diane interrupted with a smirk, stuffing popcorn in her mouth.

Renee stuck her tongue out again. "With the most beautiful blue eyes I've ever seen. They're this deep, rich blue, almost a turquoise, but more blue than green. I could stare into them forever. And he's got this delicious golden hair, too. I've known some blonds, but nothing like this."

Diane laughed. "You're totally smitten."

Renee blushed but couldn't deny it. "He's also smart and funny and sweet," Renee added. "He's got these incredibly long fingers. Sometimes I'd find myself forgetting to take notes because I'd be too busy watching him."

"All right," Diane said, one eyebrow arched, popping a piece of popcorn onto her tongue, "If he's Mr. Perfect, then why are you on the couch with me instead of somewhere doing the nasty with him?" Diane had to shield herself as Renee threw a handful of popcorn toward her. "Hey! You're cleaning this up!"

"Because he is Mr. Perfect," Renee sighed, gathering up some of the spilled corn and collecting it in her palm. "Why would he be interested in a shrimp with small breasts from Louisiana when he could have someone as blond and tall as he is?" Renee shifted the popcorn in her hands, poking it at it with her opposite finger, almost as if she were counting coins. "He's muscular, too. Not disgusting like a body builder, just nice, you know? You should see his biceps." Renee sighed. "I'm sure he has some cheerleader girlfriend at home."

"But you don't know that," Diane said, her face serious.

Renee shook her head. "I may have half my classes with him, but that doesn't mean we've gotten past more than basic conversation. 'Do you have a girlfriend?' isn't exactly idle 'getting to know you' chit chat."

"All right," Diane said, straightening up and grinning. "Ask him to meet you at The Chipped Mug. Everyone loves coffee, and that'll give you a chance to get to know him better. Worst case, you find out he's taken, and friends drink coffee together all the time. No harm, no foul. You can stay friends with him and secretly scribble Mrs. . . . What's his last name?"

"Fox. Kai Fox."

"OK, you can secretly decorate your notebook with 'Mrs. Kai Fox,' while you drool over his long fingers and golden hair and muscles . . ."

"You're mocking me."

Diane shrugged and stuffed some more popcorn in her mouth, so that when she spoke, her words came out mumbled. "Maybe a little."

Renee laughed and leaned against the cushion of the couch. "I guess you're right. It'd be nice to spend some extra time with him, and I don't really have anything to lose. Who knows, maybe he has a thing for short French girls with dark, curly hair."

Kai felt guilty about not spending the night when Nikki'd asked, even if he had a good excuse. She'd pretended she hadn't been serious, and she hadn't asked again, but it had still gnawed at him the rest of the week, so when she suggested they hit a party together Friday evening, Kai went against his better judgment and agreed. He'd never had much opportunity to experience parties when he was younger, and he didn't have an incredible fondness for crowds or loud music, but without his crutches, Kai thought it might not be so bad. And his new life was supposed to be about new experiences, right?

Well, he could cross "college kegger" off his bucket list. The party was a fairly typical opening-week beer fest, at least that's what Nikki claimed as they squeezed in the front door together, before the roar of music overwhelmed their voices. Apparently Nikki frequented these things from time to time, prowling the drunk freshmen like a jungle cat stalking its prey.

Kai wasn't sure if it was habit or residual resentment on her part or something else—women were so hard to understand—but she pointed him in the general direction of the keg, patted him on the back with a grin, and shouted for him to "have fun" before disappearing off into the throng. Unsure what to do and feeling incredibly out of place, Kai shuffled his way through the sea of bodies until he found a group gathered around the silver-barreled fountain he knew had to be the keg, even if he'd never seen one himself, not in real life, anyway. He felt suddenly silly; 22 and at his first real college party, but quickly pushed the thought aside. Kai had learned early the importance of persona, and so he pulled on his mask of casual indifference, deciding to play the role of lecherous upper classman, here for the free alcohol and

hoping to seduce a freshman or two. No one would know the difference, as long as Kai kept his face a mixture of ennui and superiority, his shoulders squared to emphasize his upper body bulk and height.

Still in character, Kai pushed past the kids gathered around the kitchen, grabbed a red cup from the stack, and shoved it into the nearest guy's hand, making sure the freshman didn't match Kai's height or weight. "Fill it," he barked. The kid didn't hesitate, but Kai ignored him, searching the crowd for Nikki. She wasn't anywhere in sight, although a few cute blondes did smile at him when his gaze crossed their paths. Kai smiled back, as fit his role, and he wasn't naive enough not to know if he waited a few more beers they'd happily blow him—or better—in one of the back bedrooms.

Maybe later, if only to flatter himself, he thought dourly, forcing his way out of the kitchen and back toward the main room. The music was loudest here, the furniture pushed aside to make room for a makeshift dance floor, bodies bumping and grinding and sloshing beer on each other roughly to the beat of the music. Kai hung back, scanning the crowd, sipping his beer and trying not to frown. How did people drink this stuff? It tasted like soapy water. Kai didn't find Nikki, but a chubby brunette dressed in a failed attempt at punk found him. She was short, even in her chunky knee-high boots, and although the music was far too loud for conversation, Kai could see in her glazed eyes she was drunk, maybe on more than alcohol. She definitely didn't look 21; in fact, she didn't look a day over 16. Either she was a very young freshman, or high-school kids had crashed the party. Even if she was of age, there was no way Kai was taking advantage of a girl so drunk she'd throw herself on him like this. And she did, quite literally, pressing her cheek against the base of his sternum, muttering something he couldn't hear but instead feel as vibrations coursing through his body.

Not sure what to do, Kai reached to hold her in a one-armed embrace, shifting his weight to his right leg. This party was a mistake. Uncertain, Kai held her for a few moments, but then he nearly fell over when he jumped in shock as he felt her massaging his crotch through his pants. His body reacted instinctively to her touch, but his brain forced him to push her away. He'd spilled nearly all of the sudsy beer when he reacted, so he found a surface to leave his cup and abandoned the girl in his quest to find Nikki.

The next room wasn't any quieter or less crowded, although the furniture here was nearly non-existent. It linked with another room through a large open doorframe, merging the spaces into one. Most likely a formal dining and living room, now it was lined with couples frantically humping each other along walls, groping on the floor, a few dancing in the center, beer sloshing as they moved drunkenly together.

Kai's hips ached as he moved through the room, and he longed for a place to sit, but there was none. Even most of the wall space was occupied by bodies, and the smell of beer and vomit was thick in the air. Kai supposed the party was much more enjoyable inebriated, but he still couldn't see the attraction. Weaving his way into the adjoining room wasn't easy, with bodies everywhere. It was still relatively early, but some were already passed out.

The thrum of music was a bit dimmer here, to Kai's relief, and he was able to find a spot of wall to lean against. It wasn't as good as sitting, but it would do for now. It didn't take long for his eyes to find Nikki. She stood in the far corner, her head thrown back in laughter and pleasure as several younger men fawned over her. It was impossible for Kai to say from here how drunk she was, but she was clearly enjoying herself. *Nikki in her element*, Kai thought, frowning, and then grew annoyed with himself. Nikki had every right to have fun; that's why they were here, after all. They weren't exclusive, he reminded himself—by mutual agreement; she may have taught him a lot about sex, and he might find himself craving her like a junkie, but she wasn't *his*. As if anyone could "own" Nikki, even if they wanted to. Nikki was a free spirit that couldn't be caged. Part of her appeal, perhaps.

When Kai had first decided to call Nikki, to see her, neither of them had planned for it to be more than sex, a one-time thing. Nikki apparently did that well, and Kai was desperate to

forget Becca. Forget how she'd abandoned him when he'd needed her most. Forget how badly she'd hurt him. Forget that rejection felt like an ugly pink scar seared into his neck.

Nikki, sexy, sexy, Nikki, who didn't seem fazed by crutches or scars, who was content to fuck him, no questions asked, seemed like the perfect medicine. But she was addictive, and one night turned to a second, and a third, and soon he'd found himself dropping by her apartment nearly every afternoon for the last few months. *Keep things superficial, physical*, they'd both decided; both parties weren't interested in anything binding or serious. It was about fun, escape, *living*. Experiencing the life he had never had the opportunity to know while simultaneously running from the new, uncertain future and the past that refused to stay forgotten, behind him.

Perhaps Nikki assumed the nights Kai didn't come to her he went to someone else. Perhaps that's very much what she did when they weren't together.

She was wearing a tight dress that buttoned in the front, and Kai could see as the men moved around her that it was half opened, one guy with his mouth on her nipple, the second with a hand up the dress, and the third, nibbling her earlobe. Nikki lowered her head and seemed to meet Kai's eyes, grinning like a Cheshire cat and pulling the nibbler in for a passionate kiss.

Kai sighed and rubbed his left thigh through his jeans. He really needed to sit down. He searched the room; at this point, even the floor would do, and his eyes caught sight of dark curly hair. His heart leapt, even though logic dictated the likelihood of it belonging to Renee was low. This was a freshman party, for one thing. He found the mane of tousled curls again and realized it wasn't Renee; this girl was much taller, with a more delicate frame, more of a model's body than Renee's compact, petite form.

Still, Kai kept his gaze fixed on this mysterious woman, if only to avoid looking at Nikki, because seeing her like that made his stomach churn despite himself. When the curly-haired woman turned at last, she saw Kai staring and grinned. She wasn't nearly as beautiful as Renee, but she wasn't bad to look at, either, with a long face and nose and large, slanting, cat-like eyes and full lips. Her skin was as pale as porcelain, contrasting sharply with her dark-brown irises. She looked even more the model as she strode toward him, one leg in front of the other, as if she were walking down a catwalk, elegant despite the mess of bodies around her. She wore a v-necked top and no bra, not that she needed one for her tiny breasts, the slit of the shirt dipping nearly to her navel.

Without a word, she approached him, planted a hand on each of his hips, and pulled him toward her into a hungry kiss. She was tall, at least six foot, so that he barely had to dip his head to meet hers. Her tongue tasted faintly of alcohol—but not beer, something stronger—and cigarettes, with an underlying sweetness that surprised him. As he felt his body reacting, a delightful heat straining against his jeans, he realized *this* is why Nikki came to these parties.

Kai's hands smoothed over the nameless girl's body as they continued to kiss, and he pressed his erection against her, his mind singly focused. *Forgetting. Living*. She leaned into him, pushing back against him, rubbing gently, her mouth trailing from his to find his pulse point, and Kai forgot his pain, forgot everything in her touch, not thinking as she unbuttoned his collar, spreading the fabric to expose his neck.

It took an instant for Kai to notice she'd pulled away from him, and he forced his eyes to look down, where he saw she was staring. He realized, too late, what her gaze was focused on, his fingers rushing up to cover his trachea scar. Her face had paled beyond its even natural whiteness, her lips hung open just slightly.

Without bothering to speak, she shook her head, colored, and disappeared into the crowd. Kai slammed his fists into the wall beside him but otherwise didn't move, not even to rebutton his shirt, his eyes tightly closed.

Kai wasn't sure how long he stayed like that, ignoring the subtle twitch of the small muscles in his hip joint, until he felt the gentle touch of fingers on the nearly invisible hair of his arm.

"Having fun?" A familiar voice asked, forcing Kai to open his eyes.

Nikki. She'd rebuttoned her dress mostly, and her hair was slightly mussed, but otherwise you would never tell she'd been entertained in the corner by several guys only minutes earlier.

Kai tried to keep his face neutral as he replied, "Not really."

Nikki slipped her arms around his neck, looking up at him, amused. She was a little drunk, but not very. Buzzed more than anything. She smiled at him. "She's still got you, doesn't she?"

Kai didn't need to ask what Nikki meant; she wasn't referring to the cat-eyed girl he'd just been snogging; no, she meant Becca, and as much as he hated to admit it, Nikki was right. Was it really Renee he'd been hoping to see in that girl, or, as illogical as it was, had his heart leapt at the thought of touching Becca again?

Kai frowned, feeling sick to his stomach as if he'd drunk even though he hadn't. "I'm ready to go. If you want to stay, that's fine . . ." Kai said, looking back toward the corner where the three guys were toasting their manly prowess or something, knocking red cups together and laughing.

Nikki followed his gaze and laughed. "Nah, I'm done here." She grinned wide. "Come on, sexy," she said, pushing herself up to kiss his trachea scar. "Let's go."

Kai was limping heavily by the time they snuck out of the party, still going full blast, the house shaking behind them from the thrum of music and gyrating of bodies. She almost apologized as they climbed into his car—for the party, for everything—but instead bit her lip and watched his profile in the moonlight. Why had she insisted on bringing him? Leaning back in the seat, she thought about it. She'd convinced herself it was fifty-fifty he'd walk out of there with someone else, some hot freshman.

Glancing over at him, she saw his eyes fixed on the road—the house was out in the country, the road back to her apartment over dark unpaved dirt through endless cornfields, the scent of manure faint in the air even with the windows closed. She remembered how he'd looked at her while she was pressed into the corner with those three boys fawning over her, touching and kissing and licking and sucking. It wasn't quite jealousy or even betrayal. Not even possessiveness. No, his eyes had been vacant, yet not lacking expression. And then that girl. Curly hair. It didn't take a genius to know why Kai's entire demeanor had changed when she'd rubbed up against him.

Nikki gritted her teeth. She hadn't even really tried to elicit the attention of those three guys until she'd noticed Kai's golden hair rising above the crowd. Ugh. This was so not like her. She hadn't even bothered to get very drunk, and although she easily could have found her own way home, the thought of Kai leaving without her . . .

She leaned over, letting her hand stroke his thigh, easing her fingers toward his crotch. In the dim light, she could see his hand tighten on the steering wheel.

"Nikki," he said, his voice stern. "Not while I'm driving."

The car bounced as it shifted off dirt onto pavement. They were still alone; no other cars, no other lights other than their headlights piercing the darkness in front of them. She ignored his words and pressed further, fingertips smoothing over the seam of his jeans, enjoying the subtle scraping sound of skin against denim.

"Nikki . . ." he said again, but as always, when she pressed him, the firmness of his voice faltered, and he cocked his right hip slightly. An invitation?

She had space. And now that they were off the worst of the back-country roads, she didn't have to worry about bumping her head. But she'd never attempted this in a car fitted with

hand controls. Would the bars leading from the grip to the pedals hit her? Probably not worth the risk. Plus, they'd be home soon, and she could have him all night. Lay him out on her bed and lick him from head to toe, little flicks of her tongue.

She shifted her left hand to his crotch, squeezing and rubbing gently, enjoying the heat beneath her palm. His breathing became more ragged, and she was seriously tempted to tell him to pull over and let her take him right there, in his car, in the middle of nowhere.

Nikki had always had an active sex drive, and she'd never been ashamed of it. But no guy she'd ever been with had turned her up and on the way Kai did. And she didn't even know why. Maybe it was his elusiveness? His boy-next-door looks? No, it was more than that. Despite how little they'd shared about their lives beyond the basic physicality of their relationship over the past few months, she sensed a kindred spirit. They were both searching for something, and although she knew it couldn't be a permanent solution, for now, they'd found it in each other.

She forced herself to back off as the lone country road widened to four lanes, with street lights highlighting the night as they drew closer to town. Sitting on her calves, she tickled his ear with her finger.

"You better come in and let me fuck you," she said, licking her lips. "Don't you dare drop me off and leave me hanging."

"Leave *you* hanging?" He said, eyebrow cocked, turning toward her briefly before returning his concentration to the road. "Fuck, Nikki, you're *killing* me."

Nikki smirked, settled back in her seat. Then the words were out of her mouth before she could stop them. "That girl. The curly hair. Back at the party. Would you have . . . if she hadn't . . . would you have fucked her?"

Kai frowned, his hand clenched on the steering wheel, a tight sigh releasing with a loud hiss of air through teeth. He dropped his head slightly, shook it, but it wasn't clear if that meant "no" in response to her question, or if it were more than that.

"I wasn't going to fuck those guys," she said, scratching at the fabric of her dress, tight around her thighs from the position in which she sat. "Well . . ." She hesitated. She'd have let them finger fuck her, maybe. They were close to doing it already. But nothing more than that.

Before she could finish, he responded, "You don't need my permission to fuck someone else, and I don't need yours." His tone was flat. Streetlight filtered in through the windshield, casting a white pallor on his forearm, where she could see the muscles were tense.

Fuck. Why do I always fuck things up? Nikki normally went for the guys who wouldn't stay because the ones who would never did. So she never had to worry about fucking things up. It was just easier. *But why is Kai simultaneously so easy and yet so . . .*

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'm a little drunk," she tried as an excuse, even though she knew he wouldn't buy it. Kai never got drunk, but he'd seen her tipsy more than once.

"Whatever," he said. "We'll fuck, fine. I'll go home. You'll go to work tomorrow. I'll see you Monday. Whatever."

He was angry. *Maybe this has more to do with that curly-haired girl than with anything I've said or done wrong*, Nikki thought hopefully.

"That girl—"

"Don't." Kai's chest rose and fell sharply a few times; his lips pressed tightly together. "Just don't."

Neither of them said a word the rest of the trip, and Nikki had been convinced he was going to drop her off and drive into the night. Instead, she found herself thrown up against her apartment door, Kai leaning into her, kissing her hungrily, bracing himself with one hand, the other roaming her body feverishly.

He pressed against her, and she sunk into his touch, the taste of his mouth, her fingers fumbling at the buttons of his shirt. Kai broke the kiss to nip at the base of her neck, the delicate skin of her shoulder, tentative bites in a line from her ear to her arm. She squirmed, slipping his

shirt off one arm at a time, tossing it away and lolling her head to one side to expose herself to him. He sucked at the skin, licking the marks with his tongue, his breath hot and warm against her.

His hand gripped her hip hard enough to leave bruises; she knew if she asked him to back off he would, but she didn't. She'd never seen him like his: so hungry, possessive; it was incredibly sexy. She moaned as he continued to swipe his tongue over her skin, a powerful yet delicate tingle coursing through her body. Her fingers smoothed over his bare chest, nearly hairless, falling into his sternal scar.

Together, they unbuttoned her dress, and she let it fall away from her, leaving her naked. He pulled back to admire her, still bracing himself with one arm, the fingers of his opposite hand trailing lightly over her skin, down through the soft space between her breasts, over her belly, finding the beginning of the tattoo that curled around her navel.

A phoenix, brilliant red-and-orange flames and feathers contrasting sharply against her pale skin. They were breathing in unison, eyes filled with lust as his touch trailed along the tattoo toward the small, neat landing strip of hair nestled above her slit. His index finger traced it, dipping down.

"You let those fuckers finger fuck you?" His voice was nearly a growl.

Her only answer was a laugh, deep and throaty.

He pressed into her, grip shifting to an arm, head bent, eyebrows furrowed. "Bed. Now."

She stared into his eyes, grown dark and steely, like the sky before a storm, and licked her lips. Once his grip released, she dashed off toward the bed, stopping only to grab a condom before hopping onto the mattress with a bounce, spreading hers legs for him, propping herself up with two hands, knowing she had to watch him, uncertain of exactly what he would do next, but excited rather than nervous.

Kai approached her, determined, but visibly favoring his right leg. Nikki observed him, touching herself absently, her head tilted slightly back. She resisted the urge to moan for him; most guys loved noise, but she could see in the fierceness of Kai's gaze that tonight would be pure and raw without excess. When he stopped at the foot of the bed, she inched forward, wiping a cunt-moistened finger on his belly before popping open his jeans and sliding them and his boxers down, down, toward his ankles.

His legs quaked, and she glanced up, noticing his diminishing erection, a slight grimace. But before she could say or do anything, he pushed her back onto the bed and crawled on top of her, pants around his ankles. He could easily crush her, but he kept most of his weight on his hands as he leaned forward toward her ear.

"Bite me," he breathed, the arch of his neck hovering over her mouth.

His body bobbed slightly with each inhalation, his cock rubbing at her leg. She wrapped an arm around the back of his neck, pulling him closer, tasting him, sucking the skin before biting, just hard enough to leave a mark. She could see the red rim from her teeth in the dim light. He groaned and managed an awkward thrust, grazing the skin of her thigh.

"Harder."

She steadied his body, shifted her mouth down, and bit again, this time harsher; he grunted, but she didn't relent, clamping down until she tasted iron, pulling back and licking at the blood. Not being exclusive, she knew she shouldn't, but she couldn't resist. They'd played a little rough before—a nip or two here, a twist of a nipple there—but never anything hardcore. Nikki'd done it before, not like that was really her scene, but right now she'd do just about anything he wanted.

He shifted, tried to press toward her; he was harder now, she could feel him.

"Fuck," he said in frustration.

She felt blindly for the little foil packet, tearing it open and tossing it aside, then lightly stroked him before rolling it on. He rarely topped her, not like this, but she was ready for him.

Nikki spread her legs, grabbed him, pulling him in and biting down forcefully on his opposite shoulder, sinking her teeth in until he arched his back and sank inside her. She held the bite, digging in her teeth before finally letting go.

He let out a low moan, shifting his hips, pulling himself deeper with his arms. She wrapped her legs around him, pressing him against her, aiding his movements. *Fuck, this feels fantastic*, she thought, eyeing the thin stream of blood filming over his skin near the marks on each shoulder.

"Kai—" she said, smoothing a palm over his chest, her other pressed against his back—anything to draw him closer.

"Don't. Just don't," he said through clenched teeth, echoing his earlier comments from the car, dipping his head.

She could smell the sweat, nearly taste it, expecting it to drip off the tip of his nose onto her face. Nikki rocked her hips up against his, squeezing his cock, moving with him, pulling him toward and away from her, reveling in the sweet hum of friction between them. Seeing him like this made the party worth it, she thought, two fingers tracing over his pecs and finding a nipple, squeezing it hard between them, making him emit a loud, low grunt. His stomach spasmed, his elbows faltered as he rode out his orgasm.

She held him close, waiting; his forehead sank to her shoulder. Then she felt him shudder.

"Kai?" she said, confused, dropping her legs and smoothing a hand on his spine.

For a moment, he held himself, his body trembling slightly, silent except for the rough rush of his breathing. Finally, he pushed, rolling himself off her onto his back, covering his eyes with a forearm, pressing his fingers into one of the bites with the other.

Nikki shifted to her side, pulling the condom off his limp cock, tying it off and tossing it away, then shimmying up to him, laying a gentle hand on his stomach.

"Hey," she said, her voice barely a whisper.

He didn't respond, nails digging into flesh until bright blood bubbled up fresh.

"Shit, Kai. What the fuck?"

He rubbed his forearm into his eyes before dropping both his hands and pushing himself into a sitting position. She tried to read his face in the dim light, but it was impossible. After a moment, he pushed the fingers of one hand toward his chest, then formed both hands into "V's," bouncing one hand off the top of the other, palms inward.

Nikki frowned, brow furrowed, and watched as his hands began to move until she reached out and stopped him, gripping his wrists. "I don't know what you're saying. Fucking *talk* to me. What the fuck is going on? Is this about the curly-haired girl? Because I think I have a wig I can throw on if that's what you fucking need."

He sighed, rubbed his thigh with the heel of one hand. "I'm fucked up, Nikki."

She laughed, propped her head on her elbow, looking at him. "Yeah, well, join the club."

That earned a smirk, and he allowed himself to fall back down. He let out a long sigh.

"You want to talk about it?" She lightly grazed her fingers on the soft, invisible hairs around his belly button.

An arm crossed over his chest, lightly testing the less bloody bite wound. "I need to disinfect these. Fuck. I need to get home."

Nikki licked her lips, leaned forward and kissed him, a few light pecks on the uninjured skin of his shoulder. "I'm sorry about the party."

He took a few slow breaths, and when she looked up, she noticed his eyes were closed. In the dim light, she could see just enough to make out the shift of his jaw bone to indicate teeth grinding and suspected the party was only part of his problems.

She watched him for a moment, smoothing a hand over his belly and onto his thigh. "I'll go get some stuff to clean the bites. You're welcome to stay, and you're welcome to go." She tried to keep her voice neutral as she disappeared into the bathroom.

Nikki stared at her reflection in the mirror, leaning on the sink for a minute. Sometimes she wondered why she bothered with him. He could be a headcase; difficult to predict and interpret, and if you attempted to plough him to try to understand what went on beneath those blond locks, more often than not he'd shut you out. Not that Nikki could really blame him. After all, this was supposed to be just sex, right? She was the one trying to make things more complicated, asking him to spend the night, taking him to parties just so she could . . . what *had* she intended? Try to bait him? Make him jealous? She blew frustrated air through her lips, pushing some hair out of her eyes.

Relationships weren't supposed to get to the point at which you needed to think, analyze, plot. She should cut him off. It'd be better for both of them. But she couldn't. Fuck. She couldn't.

She grabbed the rubbing alcohol, some cotton swabs, and bandaids, and padded back out to the bedroom, half expecting him to be gone. Instead, he'd removed his shoes, brace, and the rest of his clothes, and lay, half covered, arms folded and resting on his forehead, staring up into the darkness.

Nikki climbed onto the bed, sitting on her heels, dabbing at the bite closest to her, cleaning it and disinfecting it with the alcohol. She knew it had to sting, but he hardly reacted to her touch.

"Listen," Nikki said with a sigh, applying a large bandage to cover the wound. "I get it. I don't talk about my past, you don't talk about your past." She shrugged, started to crawl over him to access his other shoulder, but he grabbed her, held her straddling his body.

He pulled her down carefully, kissing her—intensely, but not nearly as ferally as earlier.

"Tell you what," he said between soft kisses, pulling at her lower lip. "You learn ASL and I'll tell you anything you want."

Nikki freed her hands, then mimicked his sign from earlier, knocking her fists together, index fingers of the "V's" touching.

He laughed.

She frowned. "Did I do it wrong?"

"Were you trying to tell me to fuck off?"

Her eyebrows rose, looking at him hopefully.

He laughed, grabbed her hands, rearranged them into the "V" fists. "*This*," he said, shifting her hands so that her index fingers touched, "is 'perfect.' *This*," he said, pulling her hands apart, twisting them, then bumping her fists together, "is 'fuck.'"

She laughed, genuinely amused, tossing her head back, her hair falling about her face. "So 'perfect' is only an inch away from 'fucked up.' Nice."

"God, you're fucking beautiful when you laugh, you know? Really laugh. You should do it more often."

Nikki's face drew in on itself, and she shifted off him, grabbing the supplies. "I should finish getting you patched up."

He snagged her wrist. "I can do it."

"It'll be easier for me, and I can make sure you don't miss a spot." She frowned, going to work, then smirked. "I guess it'd be kind of funny if you died because I bit you, huh? Death by Nikki!"

She'd expected him to laugh at that; he usually would've. But his face was serious, and she wondered if she'd overstepped. She hurried to affix the second bandage, preparing to apologize.

"Nikki, what the fuck are we doing?" he finally asked in a sigh. She caught the faint gleam of his eyes in what little light they had.

She laughed, cleaning up the supplies and dumping them on the nightstand. "Getting ready for bed. Unless you're up for round two?"

His eyebrows dipped, and he waved his hand, two fingers standing out, between them. "I mean *us*."

Nikki sighed, slipped under the blanket, stretched out along his side. "I thought I knew. I don't anymore."

Kai sighed, his breath shuddering out. "Ditto."

She hugged him close. "We could hit the diner, raid the pie. It's still a little early for the drunk crowd," Nikki suggested, knowing how Kai often came into the diner on days he was upset about something. He never talked about it, simply ate his pie in relative silence and left.

He sighed, brought her hand up to the bandage on his shoulder. "Not enough pie in the world for tonight," he said softly.

Nikki nodded against him. "Do you know why I have a phoenix tattoo?"

He breathed in and out a few times. "No."

"Because it shows that beauty can come from destruction, that life can rise from dead ash." She squeezed him, holding him tight as if she would lose him if she didn't. "It means that the future is sprung from the past. I never wanted to forget that."

They held each other, let out held breaths, and tried to slip into sleep.

Kai woke an hour later, his legs aching. Nikki slept beside him, curled up, half on her stomach, half on her side, sheets bunched around her. For a few minutes, he watched her sleep, knowing he had to go back to the apartment, take his meds, and brace himself for the inevitable MLS attack his twitching muscles were warning him of.

But he could stay a few more minutes. Life used to suck, but it was familiar. Now everything had changed, and he felt groundless. Jon acted like Kai was still a lost, struggling, sick six-year-old. But maybe Kai wasn't a kid, and maybe he was cured, at least of his FS, but it didn't mean he knew what he was doing. Or even who he was anymore. So many personas; did he just need to find another one? Was there any "self" for him to be other than simply another mask to wear?

Some people drank, some got high, some jumped out of airplanes. Nikki had become his escape, his path to forgetting, his way to be himself and yet something else entirely. But what do you do when your drug no longer works? When the pain seeps through anyway?

August 26, 2000

It was nearly seven in the morning, and Jon was dressed, showered, and ready to work. He'd hoped to take the day off, as Jo had suggested, to spend some time with Kai, celebrate his first full week of classes, but Jon had had too many appointments. Many of Jon's outpatients came from out of town, some as far as states away, and so Jon always made himself available on Saturdays, and sometimes even Sundays, to accommodate them. It meant many weeks he didn't have a full day off, but if he could send a kid back home able to breathe just *that* much better, it was worth it. But now he had Kai to worry about, and Jon knew he should cut back his hours. He'd start next week, he thought to himself, as he rinsed his plate and mug in the sink.

He'd already made the resolution to try to take better care of himself, if not for his sake, then for Kai's, and had forced himself to eat breakfast, check his sugar, and inject himself as necessary before preparing to head out. His first patient wasn't until nine, but he always liked to get there a little early to catch up on his inpatients and any other work he might have had left over from the night before.

Before heading out the door, though, Jon decided to check on Kai. He knew Kai didn't need to be reminded to take his medicine, but his brother had come in relatively late the night before and he didn't want him to sleep in and forget. Crossing to his brother's nearly closed bedroom door, Jon knocked softly. No response. He listened for a moment; he could just hear Kai's breathing, although it wasn't the low, even respiration of sleep. Was his brother awake?

"Kai?" Jon asked in a whisper, easing the door open gently.

The room was dark except for the bedside lamp, and as Jon poked his head in, he could see Kai stretched out in bed, supine, his right forearm across his eyes. At some point, Kai had pushed the sheets aside, so Jon could see his brother wore the faded tee and cotton pants he'd slept in.

"Kai?" Jon tried again, drawing a bit closer. He was beginning to think Kai was sleeping, and he debated about whether he should wake him or leave him. Kai was a grown man, after all, and he wasn't irresponsible. Jon turned to go, when something finally clicked. Looking back for a moment, he saw what his ears had already realized; Kai's chest rising and falling in hesitant, quick, shallow breaths: he was tachypneic.

Instinctive panic began to rise in Jon, and he rushed closer. "Kai?!"

Kai didn't shift at all, but he did respond. "I'm fine," he said, but his words were clipped, as if said through gritted teeth.

Jon felt the adrenaline coursing through him as he took a few more steps toward his brother, where he could see Kai's left hand gripped the sheets tightly. Frustrated, Jon threaded his fingers through his hair, pulling up and grasping the locks before letting them fall back down. He sucked in a breath. Kai continued to pant, but otherwise was still.

"You pushed yourself too hard, didn't you," Jon said. It wasn't a question.

The air was thick with the near silence as Jon waited for an answer. Kai continued his measured breathing, alternating flexing and clenching the fist of his right hand, squeezing his fingers tight enough to pale the skin. Several minutes passed until finally Kai responded.

"Jon, please," Kai said, his voice nearly a whisper. Jon couldn't determine if it was a plea for help or a demand that Jon leave him alone.

For the second time, Jon debated what to do, noticing Kai's left hand grip tighter on the sheets, his breath hitched. Glancing down at Kai's legs, Jon could see Kai's right foot had pointed, arched, fixed in plantarflexion. Kai's knees trembled, shaking with spasms as the muscles of his legs contracted discordantly. That made Jon's mind up, and he disappeared into the adjoining bathroom, finding the bottle of water Kai'd left from the night before, and the prescription vial he needed, tapping two pills into his palm and returning to the bedroom.

Whether by choice or spasm, Kai had his left leg partially pulled up, his knee bent and hip slightly rotated, his spasms no longer visible except in the subtle twitch of his right toes, the foot still locked in point. Kai's arm remained draped over his eyes; his breaths had grown shallower. Carefully, Jon sat on the edge of the bed near Kai's shoulder, nudging his brother's elbow with the bottle. Kai didn't move immediately, finally dropping his arm to his side. Jon could see Kai's eyes were damp and slightly red, and when he blinked, Jon saw the glaze of pain in his brother's irises, their color deep blue. Kai's gaze followed Jon's outstretched hand, and he nodded, a subtle gesture just enough to convey the meaning.

Jon shifted, watching as Kai tried to pull himself up, pressing his palms against the mattress. But when Kai got to thirty degrees, his face paled, his face contorting, and he fell back, breathing heavily. Frowning, Jon pressed the pills to Kai's mouth, slipping them onto his tongue once Kai opened for him. Then he removed the cap on the water and eased a hand under his brother's head, lifting him enough to let him drink. Once he saw Kai swallow, Jon carefully lowered his brother's head.

"Thanks," Kai signed.

Jon squeezed Kai's wrist. "I can call Troy."

"I'll be OK," Kai signed with the same hand.

Jon sighed, reminded Kai had that Taylor stubbornness, too, even if he no longer had the name. "Let me help, then."

Jon didn't wait for an answer, shifting off the bed and laying one hand on Kai's hip, the other gripping the back of Kai's thigh, gently testing the joint to see how tight it was. Jon kept his eyes fixed on Kai's face as he tried to very slowly to relax his brother's leg.

"Kai, if I'm hurting more than I'm helping, you need to tell me, OK?"

Kai nodded, and Jon readjusted his grip, then sucked in a breath.

"OK. Deep breath."

Jon carefully rotated the joint, slowly easing Kai's leg straight, pausing to massage the tiny muscles in the junction of Kai's leg. Jon stopped instantly when he heard Kai moan, the first sound of pain allowed to slip his lips.

"I'm OK. . . . Keep going." Kai held his right hand tented over his eyes.

It took several slow minutes, but Jon finally was able to stretch Kai's leg fully. Then, Jon turned to feeling the muscles of his brother's calves on each side to see how bad the myotonia was. It was worst in Kai's right foot and calf, so much that even a touch was painful. Jon frowned.

"Do you want me to try to massage you loose, or just wait for the meds?"

Kai didn't respond, so Jon leaned in a bit, forming his right hand into the ASL "K," touching his index finger to his nose, twisting his wrist, then touching it to Kai's nose.

"It'll be 'K, K," Jon said.

Kai dropped his hand and opened his eyes, smiling faintly. "God, you haven't done that since I was a little kid," Kai said, and Jon was relieved to hear only a faint edge of pain in his brother's words.

The gesture was one Jon had invented when they were children, back when Kai was very young and they both only knew a few signs and the alphabet. It had always been Jon's way of ensuring Kai that everything would be OK, that Jon would take care of him.

Jon sat on the end of the bed, taking Kai's right foot and gently massaging his arch to try to release the muscles.

"You always told me . . . it'd be OK. . . . And I always believed you."

Jon sighed, but didn't stop massaging; he could feel the fibers relaxing slightly, slowly. "You were little; of course you did."

Kai shook his head. "No. Because you always did . . . make it OK . . . if only for a little while." Jon was relieved to hear Kai's voice growing more normal; his breathing was easing, and Jon hoped it wouldn't be much longer until Kai felt the full effects of the muscle relaxant.

Jon moved up to Kai's lower legs to try to loosen the muscles there.

"Do you remember . . . after our parents died . . . and we were separated from Sara . . . that temporary boys' home they sent us to?"

"Yes," Jon said, working his thumb into the side of Kai's right gastrocnemius. "The room they put us in was like a prison cell. Long and narrow, barely wide enough for the two bunk beds." Jon remembered the room well; he'd returned to it often enough in nightmares when he was younger.

"And it smelled really strong of . . . something . . . paint?"

Jon nodded and focused on his work, grateful he'd had Troy teach him some techniques. "Disinfectant. Ammonia."

Kai inhaled a stiff breath. "It triggered an attack."

Jon swallowed, his voice sad when he spoke. "All I had was your rescue inhaler. You did so much better with the nebulizer." Jon hesitated, took a few breaths, trying to keep his voice level. "I wanted to get help, but I was so afraid. . . . Afraid if they took you away I'd never see you again." The echoes of his brother's strained breathing reverberating in that cell were as loud in Jon's memory as if his ears were hearing it now.

Kai slid his hand down until his fingertips touched Jon's. Jon took the hint and let his hand slip into his brother's, enjoying the brief squeeze of encouragement Kai offered before they drew apart again. "You held me, like you always did, and told me it'd be 'K, K,' and the next day they took me to the hospital."

Jon could feel Kai's muscles relaxing, even as his own tensed at the memory.

"They let you go with me because I was hysterical without you." Kai's voice trailed off a bit, and Jon shifted to see if Kai had fallen asleep. Part of him hoped so, because it meant Kai was out of pain and Jon could force the rest of the memory out of his mind. Unfortunately, Kai continued, a bit lazily; the meds were obviously beginning to kick in. "Then I guess I lost consciousness, or maybe they put me under to intubate me . . . because I woke up, my throat sore, and you were gone."

"Kai—" Jon's voice broke despite his best efforts.

"I thought you were gone forever, like Mom, Dad, and Sara."

"I'm so fucking sorry," Jon said, barely letting Kai finish. "I tried. I tried to stay with you. It took three men and a sedative to tear me away," Jon said almost in a whisper.

Kai surprised Jon with laughter. "You seemed so big then, but I know what I weighed at 14; you couldn't have been more than 125 pounds." Kai's smile faded, and he muttered, "Everything fuck-fuck," as if he were speaking in ASL: *everything's so fucked*. Then Kai closed his eyes, seemingly on the cusp of sleep.

Jon frowned, smoothed his hands on Kai's shins; the gesture had always comforted Kai as a child when his muscles ached. "It'll be 'K, K,'" Jon said, almost to himself. "Sleep."

Kai mumbled something unintelligible, and he relaxed into unconsciousness at last. Jon closed his eyes briefly. He and Kai had avoided talking about the past as much as possible, and neither of them had mentioned that day. Jon gripped his hair, trying not to remember how he'd screamed himself hoarse, fought and kicked and flailed as hard as he could until he'd felt a sharp pain, and minutes later, the veil of unconsciousness had closed on him. He'd woken hours later, sore and groggy, back in the narrow room, the smell of ammonia thick in his nostrils. His first thought had been of Kai, but he'd never heard anything. For all Jon knew, Kai had died. In fact, he'd convinced himself that Kai was gone; it was the only explanation his fourteen-year-old mind could conceive to explain why they wouldn't tell him anything about Kai, why they wouldn't let him go to him, why he never saw him again. Jon had spent twelve years racked with guilt, wondering if he could have done more to help his brother, that blasted room returning again and again to push him awake.

Sleep had never come easily to Jon, even before, but that day was the beginning of his clinical insomnia. It was easier to avoid sleep than have the same nightmare return, night after night, twisted so that it always ended with Kai dying in his arms in that fucking prison cell.

Jon pushed himself up, knowing he had to cancel his appointments. Kai's MLS attacks often came in multiples, and although Kai had dealt with them on his own for twelve years, he didn't have to anymore.

Kai woke several hours later. He felt heavy, like gravity had somehow magnified. His brain was foggy, and his vision blurry; it took several blinks and rubbing of eyes before it cleared. Multiple minutes of slow breathing before his mind came back to him as well, spurred on by a throbbing ache in his hips, followed by the wave of general soreness in his legs. A subtle pain between his neck and shoulder on each side. He let out a bit of a groan as he remembered. The party, *Nikki*, getting home late, waking up with his muscles spasming, Jon easing him through it as if they were still kids.

Kai sighed and decided to take inventory, seeing which muscles were willing to obey him post-attack, and which were still stiff. Nothing until his hips, which complained angrily as he pushed himself up, supporting himself with his hands. He glanced over and noticed Jon'd done him the courtesy of leaving his chair within easy reach, so Kai sucked in a breath and shifted his body toward the edge of the bed, using his hands to ease his stubborn legs over the lip, ignoring the pain in his hips.

One hand on the bed, another on his chair, he transferred, thinking how good a hot bath would feel right now, but knowing he still had his meds to take and probably should eat something, too. Then probably should do his range of motion exercises, see if he could stave off a second round. Man, he was tired. Probably the combination of only a few hours' sleep, the lingering effects of the MR, and the attack itself.

Kai pushed into the bathroom in a sigh, wondering how long it'd take him to recover from this. Part of it would depend on whether he had another attack, but even if he didn't, it was hard to say. His MLS had gotten so unpredictable lately. Kai knew it was unlikely he'd be fully back on his feet by Monday, which meant he'd have to skip class, go in his chair, or. . . . He sighed and pulled out his pillcase, checking the pills before popping them in his mouth and washing them down quickly with some tap water. If his right leg was strong enough, he could manage with one locked KAFO on his left, and while it wasn't ideal, and would make his limp far more pronounced. . . . Kai stared at his reflection. Who was he kidding? Even if he'd managed to chuck the chains of his FS, his MLS wasn't going anywhere. It was only getting worse. He'd already lost voluntary movement in his left ankle and foot. It was only a matter of time before the muscles of his legs, both, from ankle to hip, stopped responding as well. But he didn't have to think of that, he thought, as he grabbed his Amphotericin inhaler, instead, letting his mind turn to the night before. *What was I thinking?* Kai thought. *I wasn't.*

After taking two puffs, frowning at the taste he still wasn't used to, Kai pulled off his tee, staring at his reflection, smoothing his fingers over the bandages. He pulled each off, a quick tug, and examined the scabs, fingering the marks with his fingertips, resisting the urge to reopen the wounds. Physical pain was always so much easier. You clenched your teeth. You bared it. You took a pill. And if worst came to worse, you passed out for a while.

Approximately thirty minutes later, after taking his meds and adding more disinfectant with fresh bandages to the bites on his shoulder, Kai rolled himself out of his bedroom slowly, surprised when the smell of garlic and pasta sauce met his nose. Pushing himself further toward the kitchen, his chagrin increased when he saw Jon seated at the kitchen table, reclined in one chair and his feet propped up on another. Kai had to shake his head as if he were trying to wake from a dream as he realized Jon wasn't dressed for work, as he had been earlier, but instead had slipped on a pair of jeans and a T-shirt. Who knew Jon even had casual clothes? Thankfully, the

world hadn't completely spun off its axis, because Kai could clearly see now what Jon was reading: the latest issue of the medical journal *CHEST*.

"Smells good."

Jon dropped the magazine and stared at Kai for a moment before smiling faintly. "How are you feeling?"

Kai shrugged, pushed himself closer, nudging one of the chairs out of the way so he could pull into the table. "Fine," Kai responded with the ease that comes from years of down-playing his feelings. In reality, he was sore, groggy, and grumpy, wondering how long till the hypotonia passed, and whether or not it'd come on the heels of a second attack.

Jon frowned, staring at Kai, skeptical.

"Jon. I'll live," Kai said, shooting his brother a look that said, *Just leave it*.

Jon nodded, reluctant. "I made a vegetarian lasagna. It's ready, just warming, if you're hungry." Kai's eyes narrowed, one eyebrow arched, and Jon added, "I ate this morning. But I figured you'd be hungry by the time you woke up."

"Thanks. Yeah, I could probably eat," Kai said. He felt a faint pang of hunger, but mostly his mind still felt a little fuzzy, hungover from the muscle relaxant.

Jon pushed himself up. "OK, you relax and I'll make us a couple plates. Then maybe we can just chill and watch a movie?"

Kai couldn't help but look at Jon, confused. Maybe it was his drug-addled brain, but was Jon actually taking the day off?

Jon's voice carried as he went to the kitchen. "Don't look at me like that. You know I've been meaning to spend more time with you."

Kai frowned, fishing for the journal with one hand to slide it over on the table. Jon had mentioned for months how he meant to take a day off a week so they could make up for lost ground, but so far something always came up to change their plans. Kai was used to being alone, and he knew Jon's work was important, so he tried not to let it bother him. Still, it made him . . . uneasy wasn't quite the word for it. Unsettled? That it took a moderate MLS attack for Jon to finally live up to his previously empty promises.

Still, even though he would have been fine without Jon, it had been nice to have his brother help ease the locked muscles in his feet and calves, and waking up to food wasn't bad either. Jon wasn't much of a chef, but the fact that he made any effort was still touching. Kai flipped through the journal absently, lost in thought.

"There's an interesting article in there about pneumococcal pneumonia," Jon said, as if Kai were really reading it, setting a plate and silverware off to one side before sinking into his seat opposite.

Kai frowned and closed the magazine, setting it aside. "This looks good," Kai said, pulling the plate closer and cutting it with the side of his fork.

Jon shrugged, taking a forkful himself. "I don't think anyone's been killed by my cooking yet, but there's always a first time for everything."

Kai found himself laughing. Jon didn't often joke; it wasn't even that it was that funny, but it was nice, the two of them, sharing a meal together, relaxed. Kai tasted the food. It wasn't winning any awards, but it was good. The spinach especially. Jon had read an article a few months previously that suggested a correlation between a vegetarian diet and reduced exacerbations of MLS. So far Kai wasn't sure if it worked or not, but he was walking more, needing his motility aids less, so maybe it did help.

They ate for a while in silence, the only sound the scrape of fork against plate. Jon got up at one point to get them each something to drink, and when he sat back down, Kai felt the need to speak up.

"Listen . . . I'm sorry for earlier."

Jon looked up, a quick jerk of his head that tossed some hair into his face. "What?"

Kai shook his head, knowing Jon had misunderstood. "What I said this morning. You know. About *that day*."

They both returned to their food, picking at it; Kai focused on pulling a leaf of spinach out with one tine of his fork, although he did glance up to check his brother's face.

"It's OK," Jon said after a moment with a slight shrug, not looking up.

It's not, Kai thought. *The past is past and should stay there*. "I just don't want you to think that I hated you or blamed you or anything for leaving me," Kai finally said, the words rushing out. It was partially a lie, but Kai said what he knew Jon needed to hear.

At six, Kai had struggled to really understand what had happened to their parents, and then Sara was taken from them, then Jon from him. Initially, Kai had been convinced it was something he'd done, that it was his fault somehow that they'd all left him. Then he met David.

Because Kai spoke only in ASL, once he'd recovered from the ammonia-induced attack, he'd been sent to County House and put in a room with David, profoundly deaf since birth and a bit of a troublemaker. David's parents had divorced when he was barely a toddler, and his mother had died not long after that. David's father had agreed to take him at first, but quickly found dealing with a "retarded" three-year-old was too difficult, surrendering him to the state. After bouncing through several foster homes, David finally landed at CH not long before Kai.

Because of his rocky road through the system, David had believed that CH was a place to dump the kids no one wanted. David convinced Kai that his parents and siblings didn't want an abnormal kid, and so had gotten rid of him. David's theory was lent credence by the fact that Sara's birth had completely changed the Taylor family dynamic. Naturally, another child alters the relationships among a family; the youngest is no longer so, but it was more than that. Sara had been beautiful and healthy from birth, unlike Kai; a relief to his mother's guilt-addled mind. Sara was their mother's clear favorite, so it wasn't difficult for Kai to believe they'd want to cast him aside. But Jon? Jon had taken care of him his whole life, especially after Sara was born when his parents had other worries. It had bewildered and wounded Kai deeply to think that Jon had abandoned him as well.

For at least a year, Kai had still held out hope that Jon would come for him, finally having to resolve himself that CH would most likely be his home for ten more years. Once he'd grown, Kai of course knew what David had told him wasn't true, and he realized that Jon had been as much a victim of the system as Kai had. So when he'd finally reunited with Jon, Kai was happy to see his brother and held no bitterness for him personally. But Kai never told Jon any of this, and he wasn't about to start now. Even if it was the misguided misunderstandings of a six-year-old, Kai knew how much that knowledge would hurt his brother.

"It'd be understandable," Jon began, piling their plates and silverware together and standing to take them to the sink, "if you did blame me. For abandoning you." His face was sad, but he quickly retreated to the kitchen, obviously to avoid having to meet Kai's eyes.

Kai sighed and followed him, staring up at his brother's back while Jon rinsed the dishes. "Jon."

Jon ignored him, scrubbing the plates, and Kai sighed, crossing to the drawer where they kept the foil and pulling out the roll, laying it in his lap before going to the counter where the rest of the lasagna stood in its casserole dish.

"I'm sorry," Kai said again, testing the dish to see how hot it was before tearing off some foil to cover it. "I know we both had an unspoken agreement, but I always get a bit wonky on that stuff . . ."

Jon stopped what he was doing, but he didn't turn around. "Jenny called."

Kai's hands froze on the edge of the dish, where he'd been closing the foil. "What?"

"While you were sleeping. Apparently she got offered a position at Loyola in Chicago. She's moving."

Kai abandoned the lasagna on the counter and pushed closer to Jon, laying a hand on his brother's back. Jon turned slowly, looking down, but not at Kai, his hands on either side of him, gripping the counter.

"She called because she claims she has some of my stuff she wanted to give back before she goes." Jon sighed heavily, stepped around Kai and grabbed the lasagna with one hand, opening the fridge and shoving it in. "I know I shouldn't have agreed to meet her. I mean, if I haven't missed the stuff in two years, then it's probably not important, but . . ."

Kai rolled backward a bit, hands on his rims, head tilted, struggling to find his brother's eyes. "Maybe it's a ruse. Maybe she wants you back."

Jon laughed, lifting his head and shaking it before carding his fingers through his hair. "I doubt it."

"Well, if she did . . . would you go with her? To Chicago?"

"What?" Jon pushed out of the kitchen toward the table, where he leaned on it, palms spread on its surface.

Again, Kai followed his brother. "You could go if you wanted."

"My research is here," Jon said, shaking his head. "My patients. You." Jon turned, perched on the tabletop. "We spent twelve years apart, I'm not—"

Kai interrupted, his voice genuine. "Jon. Putting everything aside, if Jenny wanted you back, would you go?"

Jon sighed, swept his hand over his face, then through his hair again before shaking his head. "No. That ship's sailed. Maybe it was my fault. Maybe it never would have worked to begin with." Jon sighed again, his fingers pulling at the strands of hair between his fingers, his eyes downcast.

"OK," Kai said, although he didn't fully believe Jon. If Jon was really, completely past Jenny, then why agree to meet her? Kai didn't have long to think on this, though, because Jon soon turned the tables.

"What about you?" Jon asked, dropping his hands to his thighs.

Kai laughed. "I think Jenny's a little old for me. Plus, I don't think I could ever date a doctor. Too creepy." Kai smirked.

Jon frowned, but there was a hint of a smile hidden in it. "I mean Becca. You guys never officially ended things, but . . ."

Kai sighed and let his shoulders sink. "I don't know." Kai shook his head, frowning sadly. He hesitated before speaking softly. "Some days I pray she'll call, apologize, tell me she's changed her mind, that she was wrong. . . . Then there are others when I remember what she did, how much she hurt me, and . . . I mean, I don't blame her." Kai's dug his heel into his left thigh, his eyes down, avoiding meeting his brother's gaze. "Can't really blame her for how she acted."

Jon slammed a hand against the table and pushed himself up, anger visible in the tension of his body. "You were dying and she cheated on you!" Jon spat, face red.

Kai let the words hang in the air for a moment, reaching back and smoothing his hand on the back of his neck. When he spoke, his words were quiet and small. "I'm sorry, Jon. For Jenny."

Jon shook his head. "I made my choice. If I could go back and chose all over again—her or you—don't think I wouldn't pick you again in a heartbeat." Jon glowered at Kai until his brother reluctantly met his eyes. "Don't you dare blame yourself for what happened between me and her. And don't blame yourself for Becca, either." Jon's hands formed into fists at his side. "Because—I'm sorry—but that bitch would have cheated on you anyway."

Kai pushed to the table, draped his arms across it, and rested his forehead on them. "Maybe," Kai said, not very convincingly, his voice muffled. And part of him prayed his MLS would flare again, because that pain he could deal with.

August 27, 2000

Although Kai hadn't said it, Jon knew Kai's MLS had flared up, milder than the first attack, and that his legs were still weak. So Jon had simply nodded when Kai'd announced after breakfast that he intended to hit the Y and swim for a while. Jon had patients in the afternoon, rescheduled from the day before, but what met him with dread was the meeting he had with Jenny in less than an hour.

He changed his tie about thirty times, disgusted with himself whenever his eyes met their reflection in the mirror. Was Kai right? Was Jenny still interested and this some kind of last-ditch attempt to see if he was, too? Jon shook his head, pulling the tie out of his collar and tossing it back on the bed. He was being ridiculous. Jenny had asked him to choose between her and Kai, and he'd sided with Kai. Jon acknowledged, as he slipped on yet another tie, this one a dark, not-quite-navy blue, that he had most likely been difficult. Things had been easy between Jon and Jenny at first, but once it looked like Kai might not live long enough to be transplanted—or worse, be too sick for one—Jon had thrown himself into his work, into doing everything he could to try to keep Kai's strength and morale up, and he'd gotten a little . . . focused. But, as Jon had told Kai, he didn't regret it. He would do it again. He couldn't give up his work, even now that Kai was hopefully cured, and if Jenny couldn't understand that, then . . .

Jon sighed heavily, pulling at the knot to adjust it before smoothing back his hair. This was a mistake, he knew it. Especially since he would never leave Jonesville, especially not while Kai was still here. Whatever he and Jenny had had, may have had, was gone, irrevocable. Over the past year especially, as Kai recovered from the transplant and years of weakness, Jon had convinced himself he didn't miss her, didn't need her. He had his work and what little was left of his family, and nothing else mattered. But as he stared at his reflection, the color of the tie bringing out the blue in his eyes, he knew he'd been deceiving himself. If Jenny were willing to take him back, he knew he'd leap at the chance—so long as he didn't have to abandon his work or his brother. But hadn't that been exactly the reason they'd split in the first place?

Shaking his head, Jon clipped his pager to his belt, shoved his keys and wallet into his pocket, and snatched his white coat off the hanger. He'd keep his meeting with Jenny short and head straight to the hospital, where he knew a pile of work waited on his desk for him, eager to keep his mind occupied.

Renee lay on her bed, one knee bent, her opposite ankle resting on it, rotating the joint, making circles in the air with her foot. Her hair spread around her as she stared up at the ceiling. One hand held the phone to her ear, while the other rested on her stomach.

"I'm fine, Maw Maw," Renee said for the tenth time so far. Her grandmother, Evangeline, had called to ask about her first week of classes, worried that Renee wouldn't be warm enough or eat enough, or a number of other similar worries. "It won't get cold till October, and as far as the food goes, there's nothing a little Crystal's can't fix." Evangeline had insisted Renee stock up with hot sauce, Blue Runner beans, and other non-perishables from home before she'd left New Orleans to go north for the semester.

Evangeline sighed heavily. "I just don't understand why you had to go so far north. What's wrong with LSU?"

Renee bobbed her foot nervously. "Maw Maw, we've been over this. I needed to get away. And the architecture program here is really good."

"Oh, hon, don't I know it. But that don't mean we don't miss you. Luc especially. He's been trying to convince your daddy to let him go to NOCCA for his art."

"Yeah, well . . ." Renee began, dropping her legs and crossing her ankles. "It's more likely the pope'll tap dance naked in Time Square," Renee finished dryly.

The New Orleans Center for Creative Arts offered half-day programs for high school students talented enough to pursue the arts; students who were accepted attended their normal classes at their regular high school half the day, and spent the other half at the new campus in the Marigny, focusing on writing, music, theater, dance, or visual arts. When Renee was in high school, she'd begged her parents for permission to attend for visual arts, and had been refused. She needed to focus on her academics, they told her, on realistic goals instead of frivolous "hobbies." As talented as she was, though, Luc was infinitely more so; he had an innate eye for beauty, and art came to him as naturally as breathing. Renee could only imagine the kind of work he could produce with the training he'd get at NOCCA.

Renee sighed. "I guess I could call them, try to convince them. It'd be a shame to let Luc's talent go to waste."

"You should, hon," her grandmother said over the phone. "I know you had to do your thing, but it's been tough on him, you being gone."

"JP giving him trouble?" Renee sat up. She and her older brother had always butted heads, and JP and his sense of hyper-masculinity didn't mesh well with their younger brother's more artistic inclinations. Even though, at twenty-five, JP no longer lived at home, working for their father, and with parents who worshiped him, meant that JP was likely around the Poche residence more often than not. And without Renee there as an insulating buffer, she sometimes worried about Luc, who, at fourteen, was shy and quiet, yet somehow did almost as good a job as Renee did of pushing JP's buttons.

"You know how it is with those two. It'd mean a lot to him if you gave him a call, and even more if you managed to convince that stubborn son-in-law of mine to let the damn kid pursue art if that's where his heart is."

Renee curled her legs up and nodded, smiling at her silliness. "I miss you, and Paw Paw, and Luc," Renee said, neglecting to mention the rest of her family.

"Believe it or not, but I think JP misses you, too. In his own way. Brings you up mostly to complain about why you didn't just go to Tulane."

Renee picked at her right big toe. "You know why I had to go, Maw Maw."

Evangeline sighed. "I do. Your parents sure don't. They had Jude over to dinner the other night."

At the mention of Jude's name, Renee's blood momentarily ran cold. "For true?"

"For true, hon. I didn't even know about it until he showed up at the front door, and that stupid daughter of mine was practically on her knees licking his shoes."

Renee grunted at the visual; it was metaphoric, but not far from the truth. "He's a jerk. A jerk they hated when we were dating, and now that he's going to be a doctor, suddenly he walks on water!"

Renee had originally met Jude through her older brother, JP—they'd been fraternity brothers at Tulane, and Renee, sixteen and impressionable, had been completely smitten by the older man. He had dark, straight, thick hair he kept short but long enough to show its body, and his face—very New Orleanian in its look, with a rounded nose and strong jaw—had captivated her, especially his eyes—a light green almost gray that was eerie yet entrancing. His strong shoulders and charming grin had only added to his allure, and it wasn't long before they'd started sneaking around, seeing each other behind her family's backs.

At first, it had been great. Jude hadn't been her first sexual experience—that went to a guy she'd dated briefly and hooked up with after their freshman homecoming game—but Jude was the first real serious boyfriend she'd ever had, and first true sexual relationship. And the thrill of knowing how her parents wouldn't approve, especially since Jude was five years older, only enhanced the experience. She was young, in love—or so she thought—and she'd believed he'd loved her, too.

"You just need to find yourself a good, handsome Midwestern boy to bring home to us. Someone who . . ."

Her grandmother's voice trailed off, but Renee's mind supplied the missing thoughts. *Who won't hurt you? Who knows what "no" means?* She shuddered, but then thought of Kai. He was the first guy since Jude she'd found herself entranced by, fantasizing about. The first she thought she might be able to *be* with.

"Maybe you should tell them," Evangeline continued after a pause, her voice quiet. "You know that's not something I can do for you. Although, God, I've wanted to. Your paw paw and I left as soon as he showed up. I couldn't even look at him."

"It's all right," Renee said, hugging her legs to her chest. When she'd called her grandmother, she had hoped for a few laughs, not this, not remembering *him*, the real reason she'd gone a thousand miles north for college.

"No, it isn't, sweetie. You might be all right now, but what he did is not, and never will be *all right*. All right?"

That forced the shade of a smile on Renee's face, and she wiped her cheeks with the back of her wrist, not even realizing until the dampness met her skin that she'd been crying.

"There is this boy," Renee said suddenly. "It may not be anything, but he's nice."

"Good," Evangeline said with a smile in her voice. "You need a nice boy who will treat you right."

Renee let her body unfurl and sink back down on the bed. "Maw Maw, how did you know Paw Paw was the one? Did it take a while, or did you just know?"

Her grandmother let out an amused chuckle, then took in a breath. "I think I knew the moment I met him. I used to smoke back then, you know. Not a lot, mostly because I thought it made me look older and more sophisticated. I'd gone to Pontchartrain beach with some girlfriends, and we were hanging out, giggling and chatting, and I kept trying to light my cigarette, and the wind kept snatching the flame away. And there was your paw paw, suddenly, lighter in hand, with this steal-the-moon grin on his face. I think I fell for him right then and there."

The two women sighed together. "Thanks, Maw Maw. I love you. Take care of Luc for me, will you? And I'll give them a call. I'll talk to you next week."

Renee hung up the phone and stared up at her ceiling for a moment. Tomorrow. Tomorrow she'd see Kai again, and maybe she'd build up the courage to ask him to coffee. Maybe they couldn't be more than friends. But she'd take what she could get.

Jon pulled into a parking spot across from the Horatio Jones Park fifteen minutes early for his meeting with Jenny. Pushing his way out of his car, he leaned against the door, watching what looked like a peewee soccer game underway in the field in the distance, a sea of bobbing boys in brightly colored uniforms kicking the ball around with more enthusiasm than skill, parents yelling encouragingly from their folding chairs on the sidelines. The sun came down warm on the top of Jon's head.

He closed his eyes for a moment, breathing in the sweet smell of grass and letting the distant sounds of the soccer game filter around him, staring hard at the brilliant color that danced behind his lids. He should plan a trip. Take Kai somewhere for a weekend. He was well enough to travel, and it might be nice for the two of them to get away. But where? The idea of Chicago crossed his mind until he remembered Jenny and frowned.

The crunch of tires on pavement, followed by the cutting of a car's engine drew him to open his eyes. A silver BMW 325 was parked two spaces over, and he could hear the tinkling of the engine as a tall, thin woman with long dirty blond hair stepped out. She turned, shutting the car door, and Jon temporarily lost his breath. Her designer sunglasses perfectly framed her face, drawing his eye to her pointed chin and small mouth. The light breeze tossed her hair about her shoulders, catching the light and making her look like a model in a shampoo commercial.

"Jon," she said simply without removing her glasses, walking to her trunk, which she'd popped open. Leaning forward, she pushed the door up and leaned over, peering in, balancing

with one long leg outstretched in the air before settling her feet together and standing up with a small box in her arms.

"Jenny," Jon finally managed to echo, crossing to retrieve the box, squinting a bit against the sun. "You look good."

She shrugged. "You look surprisingly rested."

Jon sighed and tried to smile, although he was certain his cheeks failed him. "Kai's doing well. Believe it or not but I took yesterday off."

She snorted, but managed her own smile, a veneer, perhaps, but it still made a warmth fill Jon's stomach.

They stood together in silence for a moment, and Jon shifted the box, peering into it to try to determine its contents. From what he could see, it was all junk, and when he bothered to glance back up at Jenny, he saw she'd removed her sunglasses and was waiting to meet his eyes.

The deep green of her irises betrayed her reticence, and Jon realized Kai was right. This meeting had nothing to do with the box of junk Jon held with one arm, rested on his hip.

She bit her lip and thrust her hand into her pocket, hesitating for a moment. Her teeth briefly caught her lower lip as she slowly pulled her hand out, fisted.

"Just one more thing," she said. "Something of yours you should have back."

Jon watched, and as she held up her hand, palm up, slowly opening her fingers, his stomach sank into his feet and he nearly dropped the box. The sun caught and reflected in the facets of the diamond of the ring nestled in the grooves of Jenny's palm.

Jon stared at it for a moment, unable to move, struggling to process the finality of the gesture.

"I know you had told me to keep it in case I changed my mind. But I'm not coming back to Jonesville. It didn't feel right to hold onto it anymore."

Jon felt her take his free hand and place the ring firmly in it. Forcing himself to look up at her, he saw a wane smile as she pulled her sunglasses back on. Already crossing around her car to shut the trunk and make for the driver's door, she looked back at him.

"You're doing good work, Jon. Hope I get to read your research in *JAMA* someday." She pulled her door open, and just before she slid in, she added, "I really hope Kai does well." A subtle nod of her head, then she sank into the seat, pulled her door shut, started her engine, and pulled carefully away.

Gripping the ring almost painfully, the box pressing against his ribs as he held it with his opposite hand, Jon knew he'd never see her again.

September 1, 2000

Renee had resigned herself to the fact that she might not see Kai again. He hadn't come to any of the classes they shared together; she'd spent most of each class searching the vastness of the large auditoriums hoping maybe he'd simply chosen another seat, and still she hadn't spotted him. It was possible she'd missed him in the crowd, but with each class without seeing him, she'd become convinced he was either one of those students who showed up the first week and then didn't appear again until the exam, or he'd simply changed his schedule.

She'd even taken to dawdling around campus—the library, the cafeteria, the student center—hoping she'd at least see him in passing if nothing else. But with such a large campus, she knew the odds of just "running into" him were low, and she tried to shelf her disappointment. After all, she'd only shared a few hours with him, and it wasn't like he was interested in her anyway. How could he be?

Renee sighed to herself as she crossed one of the smaller quads. She knew she should head home. She started at Lost Apple Books tomorrow, and she had a lot of work to do, even if it was only the second week of classes. At least they had Monday off for the holiday, not that Renee had any plans. Diane was going up to visit her family; in fact, she probably had already left, Renee realized. Not in a particular hurry to get back to the empty apartment, she decided maybe she'd grab a coffee at The Chipped Mug and try to get through some of her reading surrounded by the smell of roasted espresso and muted conversation.

The sun was hot, but not unpleasant, as she passed through the mostly empty quad, thinking of Kai and hating herself for thinking of him. She was 19, but acting like a middle schooler with a puppy crush. She just couldn't get the image of his smile, his eyes, his hair, his unusual long fingers out of her mind, no matter how she tried, and studying her core classes only made it worse, because they made her think of him even more.

Renee was so lost in her thoughts she almost walked right by him. But something made her turn her head just as she walked past the benches near the halfway mark of the quad. He sat on one of them, lengthwise, both his legs pulled up and stretched out in front of him, the shade of one of the trees casting leafy shadows over his shoulders. His bag was wedged behind his back, and he had a textbook open in his lap, an arm on the top of the bench, the other, a rubber band on his wrist, propped the pages open. His head was bent, his hair falling loose and partially covering his face, the sun catching it and making his entire head glow, an artful contrast of light and shadow. God, he looked even more beautiful in sunlight than he did indoors, Renee thought, feeling her stomach flutter. Even though she hadn't seen his face, she knew it was him.

Unable to contain her excitement, she rushed up to him, stopping with halting breath just in front of the bench. "Hey."

He looked up; dark wrap-around sunglasses shielded his eyes from her, but she could still see the shift of his expressions, first surprised, his eyebrows arched, his mouth slightly open; then annoyed or angry, eyebrows dipping, mouth closing into a frown; before wiping everything clean with a smile that didn't *look* forced. Maybe he was just irritated about being disturbed.

"Sorry. If you're busy, I can go . . ." she said, feeling her cheeks heat.

He reached to scratch the back of his head. "It's OK." His nose wrinkled for a moment before he smiled again.

"I just hadn't seen you around. Thought maybe you changed your schedule or something." Renee tried to see through the lenses; even though he was smiling, she still sensed tension in his shoulders and by the way he pursed his lips seemingly without realizing it.

Kai folded his book closed; Renee could see it was their World History text, and shifted it in his lap, rubbing his left thigh a bit. For a moment, she didn't think he was going to answer, his

gaze fixed downward.

Had she said something wrong? She noticed he kept his legs awfully still. As much as he seemed to fidget, his hands rarely staying long in one place, it seemed discordant, strange.

Finally, he lifted his head, again smiling, and said with a shrug, "Something came up and I couldn't make it to class." He paused, and Renee found herself holding her breath. "I missed you."

Renee exhaled with relief. "You could borrow my notes, if you want," Renee said, then remembered Diane's suggestion. "Or . . ." Renee looked toward the opposite end of the quad, then back to Kai. "Or we could go grab a cup of coffee at The Chipped Mug and I could fill you in on what you missed?"

Kai's face seemed to hesitate for a moment, as if it couldn't decide on an emotion, before he finally smiled. "Sure, that'd be great."

Renee gestured with her thumb toward the opposite end of campus. "If you're free now, we could walk together . . . it's not far from here, actually."

Renee couldn't tell his reaction, because he immediately covered his face with his hand, taking a breath before pulling it away to respond. He wasn't smiling; she couldn't quite gauge his expression, even now that his face was in full view. Kai almost looked . . . tired, but that couldn't be right, could it? Weary, maybe? Or maybe . . . it suddenly hit Renee: what if Kai was just being polite earlier, and he didn't really want to spend time with her? Maybe he'd thought she had meant "grab coffee" in the generic sense, and now that it was concrete, actually happening, he was trying to formulate an excuse to avoid having to meet with her?

Perhaps her apprehension showed clearly in her face, because Kai reached for her wrist, taking her hand in his; it seemed so small in the midst of his palm, and she felt herself tingle as she felt those round, calloused fingertips cradle her skin.

"It's OK," he said softly, almost to himself, staring at their hands before looking up. "I have a few things I need to do but I'll meet you there in twenty minutes?" He smiled, but it wasn't like his other smiles. This one was softer, more genuine somehow, a more complex grin than she'd seen before. Even with his eyes obscured, this grin seemed to show more of Kai than he'd let her see so far, and it made a warmth flutter up in her stomach.

"OK. Great," she said, feeling her face light up. "OK," she said again, bouncing, not wanting to leave him, but obviously needing to go. "Um, I guess I'll see you in a bit, then. I'll go copy my notes, I guess. Bye," she added, walking backwards toward the library for several feet so she didn't have to look away from him.

Kai laughed and waved, and Renee felt like she was floating even once she turned a corner and he was long out of her sight.

Kai kept his smile up until he saw Renee disappear around the corner. Then he let his entire body relax—at least the part of it that would—and released a long breath. His heart was still fluttering in his chest, whether from nerves or the budding attraction he felt between them, he wasn't sure. Kai sighed as he reached behind him for his backpack, stuffing his book into it before pulling it on. He hadn't been sitting here that long, and it wasn't too hot, especially in the shade—not that he could stand to be in the sun long due to the antirejection meds—but he was already sweating through his brace socks, and what he really wanted was to go home and take his KAFOs off.

Checking the knee locks with his fingers, he used his hands to ease his legs off the bench one by one, pushing himself carefully to his feet, placing most of his weight on his right leg. Making sure his left leg was extended, he locked the joint, finally shifting to balance on both feet. Kai looked around for Renee, even though he knew she was long gone, and was grateful for the hybrid plastic/leather orthotics he'd switched to recently. The upper, thigh portion was more the traditional leather he was used to, but the lower half, below the knee, was made of molded plastic that not only gave his calves and ankles more support, it meant they fit in his shoes with a

footplate instead of attaching on the outside with a metal stirrup. Which made his braces nearly invisible under his jeans.

Kai shook his head as he carefully made his way to his car, keeping his left leg locked and allowing his right to swing freely. Why did he care so much whether Renee or anyone else, for that matter, knew the truth—or even part of it? She was bound to notice, if not now, at some point soon; it wasn't like he could hide at home forever. After avoiding campus the entire week, today, he'd meant to go to class. He'd gotten up on time, gone through the motions, ignoring the lingering aches in his legs that were just enough to make him want to change his mind. He'd put on his braces and gotten in his car, and had driven to campus in time for his first class. But instead of parking, he'd simply driven around most of the day, sometimes pulling into a space and seriously thinking of going to history or philosophy or English, only to feel a muscle twinge and remind him of his hesitancy. Finally, after missing all of his first two classes and most of his third, he'd decided to sit on a bench and study for a while rather than show up disastrously late. The last thing he wanted was to draw attention to himself.

As Kai climbed into his car, he tried to convince himself it was pain and stiffness that had kept him from his classes all week, but he knew that wasn't really true. When it came down to it, despite his "new start" mantra, he didn't really care what anyone thought of him—except, bewilderingly, Renee. He turned the engine and shifted into reverse, then, with one hand on the wheel and the other on the controls, backed out of the spot. He should never have agreed to meet her. It wasn't like he even drank coffee.

He hadn't intended to tell her he'd missed her. It had slipped out. It was true, of course, but . . . it didn't make sense. He'd spent a total of nine hours with her, they hadn't spoken more than small talk, and yet . . . Kai could see the coffee shop ahead. Maybe if he got there early, it'd be OK. His walk wasn't that bad. He sighed, drumming his fingers on the wheel as he waited for the light. Kai knew he had to decide what he would tell her if she asked about his legs. The truth? He focused on the red of the stoplight. The problem with the truth was it would most likely invite lots more questions, questions he didn't want to answer, not now, anyway.

More than anything, though, it bothered Kai how much this bothered him. Growing up in a small town, living a fairly sheltered life, he hadn't had too many occasions to meet new people to whom he had to explain himself, but he had never had a problem talking about his MLS before. It was what it was. As much a part of him as the color of his hair or eyes. He began to wonder if this whole "new start" mantra was just another persona, another attempt to become someone else to avoid who he really was.

Kai gritted his teeth as he pulled into the coffee shop. He'd tried being himself before, and what had that gotten him? The two handicapped spaces were both empty, so he parked in the first one and closed his eyes. He absently flicked the rubber band against his wrist as he thought. *Becca*. He remembered waking up for the first time after his transplant, his mind still foggy from the drugs, the respirator breathing for him, his chest a bizarre mixture of pain and numbness. *Snap. Snap*. Jon had found the best thoracic surgeon he could get on the short notice necessitated by the transplant, who'd used an experimental technique to try to graft the major nerves. It wasn't a guarantee, but the hope had been that Kai might have quasi-normal sensation in his new lungs, which would help him keep them clear. But it took months for the nerves to grow and heal, and for a while, Kai had needed to get used to the odd disembodied sensation that his lungs weren't a part of him. But of course, they weren't, were they?

Snap. Snap. But that first moment of waking to his new life, when his eyes had finally found focus, it was Jon's face, and only Jon's face he'd seen. It wasn't until several weeks later, after he'd been extubated and his stoma was healing, that Becca had even deigned to visit him. And still, he hadn't hated her, not then. He'd simply been happy to see her, hoping that once he recovered a little more they could have a life together. *Snap. Snap. Snap*. But it had all been too much, or maybe he was somehow not enough, as she'd told him in slightly less concrete terms in the alley behind the diner, the day he'd met Nikki. He loved Becca and he hated her, but mostly

he couldn't stand the way she pulled him in several directions at once, making him unsure of himself in a way he hadn't felt in a long time. *Snap. Snap. Snap. Snap.*

Kai inspected his wrist, the flesh red, although he barely felt the sting; it was more of a dull buzzing sensation that faded almost instantly when he rubbed his thumb over the mark. Shutting off the engine, Kai decided he didn't want his FS or MLS to get in the way of his budding relationship with Renee, whatever it was. He didn't want to be too little or too much; with Renee, he didn't want to be anything other than "just right." Kai wasn't sure if that was even possible, but he was willing to try.

Kai concentrated on taking slow, short steps to make his walk look as natural as possible, pushing up with the toes of his right foot to help him swing his locked left leg forward. Walking this way was easier on his hip, and it was the subtlest way of moving—not quite natural, but not nearly as obvious as hip hiking or swinging his hip out. Although he was convinced everyone would be able to see through his jeans to his orthotics, no one even seemed to notice him. Kai wasn't used to *not* being stared at, and it felt both relieving and disorienting.

Ignoring the counter, he headed toward the back, hoping to find a comfortable seat, preferably tucked into a corner somewhere. His body stiffened, and it wasn't due to his MLS, when he saw Renee, sitting curled up in one of the plush armchairs along the back wall, a stack of papers in her lap. She was beautiful, reading over the notes, her curly hair falling around her shoulders in tight black corkscrews. Kai remembered how small her hand had felt in his, and he realized his heart was quickening. He had to decide—now—what he would tell her if she asked about his legs. If he wasn't going to tell her the truth, he needed to know what he would say. He didn't want to lie, so making up a story was out of the picture. Best to keep his explanation vague and simple. Concealing or skirting the truth wasn't the same as lying, and the entire point of avoiding the truth was to avoid a litany of questions. *Deep breath.*

Forcing a smile, Kai approached, trying his best for casual and disaffected. Not quite the same mask he'd worn for most of the party last Friday, but enough to keep himself at a distance.

Making sure he was standing still to mask the orthotics as much as possible, he said, "Am I late?"

Renee startled, but when she looked up at him, she smiled, staring—no, not staring, appraising. "No," she said, with a slight shake of her head, and Kai loved the way it made her curls bounce. "I was able to copy the notes a lot faster than I thought, so here I am."

Kai shifted his weight to his locked left leg, and shoved his hands in his pockets to resist the urge to lean forward and smooth a curl between his fingers. For a moment, they just gazed at each other, and Kai couldn't help noticing Renee absentmindedly licking her lips. He didn't see a coffee mug or to-go cup anywhere, and was reminded that being crutch-free left his hands open.

"Can I get you something to drink?"

"Oh," she said, smiling and blushing just slightly.

She really was beautiful. Her face was almost heart-shaped, her chin pointed yet rounded so that it was soft, rather than harsh, and she had large, round hazel-green eyes perfectly framed by dark eyelashes. Kai squeezed his hands around his rescue inhaler in his pocket, feeling that tightness just below his sternum again. His breathing hitched, and he grew nervous, although he did his best not to let it show on his face.

She cleared her throat and shook her head, laughing a bit. "Sorry," she said, smiling. "You're . . . distracting."

Kai felt something in him shatter—it wasn't entirely an unpleasant feeling, and he was grateful for the locked brace to keep him upright. He loved Becca, and he loved the way Nikki made him feel, physically, but Renee . . . he knew now where the term spellbound came from. A relaxed, genuine smile tilted his cheeks.

"So are you," he said, feeling the tightness increase and forcing himself to keep his smile. "So what would you like?"

She tilted her head, pressed an extended index finger to one cheek in an exaggerated thinking motion. "No one here knows how to do a proper cafe au lait," she said with a pout. "A latte, I guess. Thanks."

Kai nodded. "OK, I'll be right back." He slipped his bag off his shoulder and dumped it on a chair, then hesitated for a moment, glancing first back toward the counter, then toward the restrooms, not far from where he stood.

The tightness hadn't subsided, so he carefully made his way toward the opposite corner, relieved that the bathrooms were the single-person style, slipping in and locking the door, quickly leaning against it as soon as he could.

Now that he was safely alone, he shut his eyes and listened to his body. It wasn't quite the same feeling he'd had pre-transplant, but it was wrong. His breathing came fast and quick. He wasn't wheezing, but definitely felt uncomfortable, and decided it wouldn't hurt to use his inhaler. He fished it out of his pocket, shaking it and uncapping it, hesitating. He closed his eyes, then forced himself to take a deep breath and let it out before placing the inhaler in his mouth and pressing the canister at the same time that he inhaled, pulling the medicine into his lungs. He held it there a moment, then repeated for a second puff, waiting to see if he could feel a difference.

Kai knew the medicine didn't work instantaneously, but he didn't feel any better; if anything, he felt worse, the constricting feeling mounting, the hint of a wheeze carrying on every exhalation. It was his imagination. A trick of the nerves. This couldn't be an attack. He hadn't had one since before his transplant, and there hadn't been anything to trigger it that Kai could think of. It was just the anxiety playing tricks with his mind. Kai closed his eyes, staring into his lids, and focused on taking slow, deep breaths. Of course he knew stress could trigger an attack, too, but this wasn't an attack. It *couldn't* be an attack.

Renee shifted in her seat, glancing over at the restroom. She'd noticed Kai had walked oddly; he hadn't walked like that before, had he? Then she realized: she'd never seen him walk before. Every time she'd gotten to class, he was already there, and he always made some excuse as to why he couldn't leave with her. She'd assumed it had something to do with the girlfriend she was sure he had, but . . . was there something wrong with his leg? Or his hip? Or maybe it was simply her imagination?

Whatever it was, it didn't detract at all from how incredibly handsome he was, and how charming. She sighed a little and rearranged the photocopied papers in her lap, double-checking that they were all there. A little flutter of hope bubbled up in her stomach. Maybe he was single. Maybe he liked her. Maybe they had a future.

Renee watched as Kai walked toward her, a coffee in one hand and a bottle of juice and a paper bag in the other. She pretended to read over the notes in her lap, watching him in her peripheral vision, noting how his shoulders rolled as he walked, one leg obviously compensating for the other.

She allowed herself to finally look at him straight on when he spoke, handing her her coffee. "I didn't know if you liked sugar or not."

"This is fine, thanks," Renee said, smiling.

She saw how he bent awkwardly to set his drink and bag on the table between their two chairs, then shifted, gripping the sides of the seat and lowering himself into it carefully; she noticed his left leg stayed straight as he sat, and she couldn't help focusing on it, fascinated.

"I see you've noticed my bad leg."

Renee realized she'd been staring and flushed, gripping her coffee and looking sheepish. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean . . ."

He laughed, and although she kept her eyes down, she watched as his fingers moved to one side of his left knee, then slowly pushed his leg until it was bent like his right. "It's OK."

Renee forced herself to breathe. Curiosity overwhelmed her, but she bit it back; she had so much more she wanted to know about Kai other than his leg, and she worried if she pressed the issue he might lock up and she'd never learn more about him.

She sipped her coffee to buy her some time, noting how he reached forward for his juice, setting it between one leg and the arm of the chair, then pulled a pastry out of the bag.

"I didn't know what you'd like, so I got a variety," he said, pointing to the bag. He took a bite of his and then continued, chewing, as if he'd suddenly realized something in the act of eating and couldn't wait to swallow to say it. "Oh, you're not diabetic, are you?"

She laughed, a nervous giggle, and shook her head, leaning forward to glance in the bag. "No, but thank you for being considerate."

"My brother is. Diabetic. He's supposed to avoid sugar, and I can't get enough of it." He smiled and blushed slightly, and she got a feeling that the guard he normally kept up around him had fallen down a bit.

Renee pulled a cookie out of the bag and nibbled on it, ignoring the crumbs that fell onto the pages in her lap. "You said you have a brother; do you have any other siblings?"

She saw something change in Kai's face; it was subtle, a microexpression, before he smiled and opened his juice to drink. After he'd swallowed, he responded, "No. It's just me and my brother," in a tone she couldn't distinguish.

Nodding, Renee sipped her coffee, again to buy her some time. "I have two brothers. JP's five years older, and Luc's five years younger." She shook her head, transferred the cookie so it balanced on top of her coffee cup, and handed over the sheets of paper, shaking out the crumbs.

He took it from her, hardly needing to lean forward with his long arms, smiling faintly. "Thanks."

"That's everything," she said. "I hope it helps."

She watched as he dipped his head to flip through the notes, his golden hair hanging down in front of his face. "I appreciate this," he said, waving the papers and reaching for his bag to stuff them into it. "Look," he said, pausing in zipping his backpack up. "I don't want you to think I'm taking advantage of you, but there may be times in the future that I'll have to miss class. Do you think . . . ?"

Renee leaned forward, thinking she wouldn't mind Kai taking *advantage* of her at all. "I'm happy to help. Really, any time," Renee said, blushing at how over-eager she sounded.

He laughed and leaned back in his chair, smiling, as if he'd read her thoughts.

Renee cleared her throat, shifted her cookie so she could find some solace in her coffee. "You a psych major?"

His eyebrows dipped, and he unscrewed the lid of his juice to drink, but said nothing.

"You mentioned Intro to Psychology was one of your classes, so . . ."

He licked some juice off his lips searchingly, and Renee knew it wasn't intended to be erotic, but everything about him was so delicious. She was crazy; he just wanted someone to mooch notes from. That's all she was to him. She sighed softly, and tried to get back on task, thinking what she could say next, since it seemed like he wasn't planning on answering her. Maybe all he'd wanted was the notes, and now that he had them, he was thinking of a way to leave without seeming too rude.

"I'm undeclared, but leaning toward psych," he said with a shrug. "I think I'd like to work with kids someday, maybe."

That made her smile, picturing Kai, as tall as he was, sitting curled up on the floor surrounded by children, reading to them.

"You're not taking a foreign language?" Renee swirled the cup before taking another sip, already trying to think ahead to her next question, anything to keep him here and talking with her.

He shook his head. "Tested out," he said, then finished off his juice and tossed the bottle onto the table.

"Me too. *Francais. Et toi?*"

"ASL," Kai finger spelled.

"Sign language?"

Kai nodded with his fist and head. "Fluent."

"That's really cool," Renee said, then grimaced. "Sorry, that sounded really lame."

Kai used a hand to stretch out his left leg, then leaned back in his chair, almost as if he were ready to nap. He certainly looked tired enough. Defeated, almost. "So you're not from around here."

His question caught her off guard. "Oh, yes. I'm from New Orleans."

"Lived here all my life," he said, as if he'd anticipated a question, scratching under his nose with one long finger. "So what brought you to middle-of-nowhere Iowa?" he asked sardonically.

Renee laughed, but it was a nervous, forced laugh. "I needed to get away. A fresh start. You know?"

Kai inhaled sharply and nodded. "Do I."

Nikki leaned against the alley wall, one foot pressed against the brick, her knee bent. She sucked hard on her Nicotrol inhaler, trying to pretend it was a cigarette and not succeeding very successfully. She glanced at her watch, a cheap one with a plastic band she'd picked up at Walmart, and debated about whether or not she had time to run across the street for some real nicotine, when the kitchen door opened, attracting her attention. Marge squeezed out, looking a bit flustered.

"I still have five minutes," Nikki said, taking a final inhale of the Nicotrol before shoving it in her apron pocket.

"I know," Marge said. "But Blondie's here."

Nikki used her foot to push off from the wall, turning and folding her arms on her chest. "He has a name."

Marge got a doughy-eyed grin. "Doesn't mean he can't have a nickname." Her smile soon soured. "I took his order, but I think you should serve him. It's a three-for."

Nikki blinked and dropped her hands, joining in Marge's frown. "Did he say what's wrong?"

Marge shook her head, looking worried.

Nikki laid a hand on Marge's shoulder as she passed her to reenter the diner. "Thanks for getting me."

Nikki smiled at Clyde, the short-order cook, as she poured milk into a mug and threw it into the microwave. Then she crossed to the pies, covered and stacked on the counter, grabbing plates and a knife. Kai had the biggest sweet tooth Nikki'd ever seen. His usual order, when he stopped by the diner, was a slice of pie and a mug of hot milk, to which he'd add half a shaker's worth of sugar. Whenever something was bothering him, Kai'd ask for two slices. So if he ordered three. . . .

The microwave caught her off guard, and she jumped, grabbing the mug and setting it on a tray with the pie. Sucking in a breath, Nikki pushed back against the swinging door, tray in hand, and entered the dining room. It was a little early for the dinner crowd, so the diner was mostly empty. Kai sat perched on a bar stool, hunched over the counter, looking a bit like a disheartened yellow lab puppy.

Nikki set the mug and slices of pie on the counter, then tucked the tray under an arm to study him. He said nothing as he reached over to dump sugar into his milk, stirring it with his spoon as if he were on autopilot.

"All right," Nikki said, watching as he set his spoon aside and picked up a fork. "Why three slices?"

Kai gripped his fork backward, lazily, and stabbed at the first slice. Shrugging, he

responded, "I like pie. I have a lot of years to make up for."

Nikki frowned, but Kai didn't see since he was bent over his pie, breaking it up with his fork, but not eating much. He'd only managed a few bites when she decided leaning over the counter wasn't getting her anywhere and turned to set her tray down. She glanced toward the opposite end of the counter and caught Marge's eye, gesturing with a flick of her hands to suggest moving around to join Kai. Marge nodded, and waved toward Nikki to tell her to go ahead, then went back to refilling coffees.

Nikki jogged around the counter and sunk down into the stool to Kai's right, laying a hand on his back and leaning in to whisper. "Becca call?"

Kai stopped stabbing his pie and hesitated before looking up at Nikki, his eyes a little wider, irises dark blue. He shook his head, then dropped it again to resume dissecting his nearly untouched food.

Nikki watched him push one smashed slice away and pull another closer, breaking off a portion with the side of his fork before hesitantly slipping it into his mouth, chewing slowly. She rubbed his back, realizing he wasn't offering any info freely.

"Tell me why it's a three-slice day," Nikki said softly.

At first, she didn't think he'd answer, since he hunched further, digging into his pie as if trying to excavate some buried treasure. Finally, he sighed, laid his fork down, and reached into his right pocket. Nikki watched, confused, as he laid his fist on the counter, releasing his fingers slowly and depositing something that clattered as it came to rest on the surface. His hand then returned to his fork.

Nikki stared at the inhaler, confused.

Without taking his eyes off the mash of fruit and crust he was focused on, he spoke. "I had to use it today."

Nikki shifted. "Oh. Are you OK?"

Most of what Nikki knew about Kai she'd learned from Becca, who, until things started to fall apart between them, had let everyone with an open ear know about Kai. Because Marge and Nikki were the only two staff (other than Clyde), who stayed around more than a few weeks, it meant the two waitresses were more exposed to her stories than anyone. At first, it seemed like the typical lovesick drivel that Nikki mostly ignored, reminding herself how she was glad she'd never had a relationship last long enough for her to moon over anyone.

But after a while, Nikki had begun to pick up a common theme—Kai was always sick, either because he'd had an attack, or he'd gotten pneumonia—and the way Becca related these travails. . . . Something just wasn't right. At the time, Nikki wasn't sure how accurate Becca's accounts were, since they seemed significantly exaggerated, Becca mopping up all the sympathy she could get, as if she were petitioning for sainthood for being with someone like Kai. It had made Nikki nauseated at the time, and later, once she'd started seeing Kai and realizing—deductively—how truly sick he must have been. . . . Becca had never been someone Nikki liked, and after getting to know Kai, to see what he'd gone through, knowing Becca had used him and then left him when he needed her most. . . . Nikki was glad Becca had disappeared, because Nikki didn't think she could stand working with that bitch again.

Nikki wasn't sure if Kai was aware of all that Becca had done, or if he knew how much, relatively, Nikki understood about his health. All she knew was that ignorance is bliss, and Kai had enough demons and worries without adding to it. Becca had hurt him deeply, and Nikki wasn't sure he needed to know exactly how much.

What Nikki did know based on what Kai had told her, was that he'd been sick most of his life, and that he'd had a lung transplant a year ago. That he was enjoying being attack-free, and as far as she knew, this was the first time he'd needed to use his inhaler since before.

Kai didn't respond immediately, poking the fork repeatedly into the pie as if expecting it to come alive. "Yeah. . . . I mean, I don't *feel* the same way as I did before. . . . So I don't know." He sighed, scooped up some fruit and shoved it in his mouth mechanically, reaching for his mug

and washing it down with lukewarm sugar-milk.

He continued, talking to his pie, talking to himself, it seemed. "Maybe it wasn't an attack. . . . I don't know." He stabbed the center of the slice, his hand fisted on the fork, his frustration palpable. "I don't know if I should see if it happens again, or tell Jon, or Dr. J . . ." Kai sighed heavily, discarding his fork to palm the inhaler. "What if . . . what if it's a sign of rejection?" Nikki watched him squeeze the inhaler tightly in his palm until his skin whitened. "What if . . . What if it means I'm not . . ." He drew in a hitching breath before finishing in a voice so low, Nikki nearly missed it. "Cured?"

Kai sighed, shoving the inhaler in his pocket and turning to the third piece of pie, spinning the plate around absently back and forth.

Nikki watched him for awhile. She'd seen him upset over Becca, but he usually kept his guard up; she'd never seen him look so utterly . . . defeated. Unsure what to do, she said nothing, smoothing her hand over his back, watching as he took small, deliberate bites of the third slice of pie. She couldn't stand to see him like this, so she pulled her keys out of her apron pocket, fished her house key off, and slid it along the counter toward him. He stared at it, then up at her, confused.

Nudging it toward his hand, she spoke low but firmly. "You're going to finish your pie, then you're going to take that, get in your car, and drive to my apartment. You're going to let yourself in, and you're going to strip, then you're going to lie on my bed and wait for me. And when I get off work, I'm going to come home and fuck you till you can't think anymore."

Kai looked up at her, his face long and eyes dark blue. "Nikki . . ."

She shook her head, picked up the key, and shoved it into his hand. "You'll do exactly as I say, or I'll tell Marge you're cut off. No more pie."

Kai's eyes widened and his mouth dropped open, his arms reflexively cradling his pie slice as if Nikki were ready to snatch it from him.

She had to stifle a laugh, leaning forward to kiss him on the tip of his nose. Hopping up, she smiled. "I have to get back to work, but my shift's almost done, so I'll be home soon." She winked and started to head toward a table where a family had just been seated for an early dinner.

"Thanks," Kai muttered with a shy smile.

What am I doing? Nikki thought, sighing and then plastering on a smile as she approached her new table. Every instinct told her giving him her key—even if it was temporary and in no way a sign that they were any more than fuck buddies—was the type of thing the old, pre-Kai Nikki would never have done. Her voice screamed in Nikki's head: *first you try to quit smoking for him, then you ask him to spend the night, now you're nearly asking him to move in with you? Fuck*, Nikki thought, her stomach churning, as she took the family's drink order, her eyes lingering on the two kids squirming as each parent tried to calm them. *This* is what Kai wanted; he was the white-picket fence guy, and she just wasn't the "two-and-half" kids type. Reminding herself as she strode toward the soda fountain to get the beverages that she wasn't what Kai wanted or needed, not long-term. She never was and never would be, and it'd be best for everyone involved if she kept things simple, and stopped trying to be something she wasn't, something she never could be.

Kai dropped his bag in the back corner near Nikki's bed, leaning his crutches against the wall. He'd decided to bring them, hoping he could maybe avoid putting his braces on again for a while. It felt strange, being in the quiet apartment without Nikki, the only sounds the shuffle of feet or movement of furniture from the surrounding apartments, and the subtle hum of the fridge in the kitchen a few feet away.

Kai took a deep breath, and stared at his wrist, the thick flesh-colored rubber band lying against his skin. He pulled at it with his opposite thumb and forefinger, as far as the resistance allowed, before letting it slam back. He barely felt the first sting, so he repeated it a dozen times

until the redness remained, then cursed under his breath and pulled his shirt over his head in one fluid motion, tossing it aside.

He unbuttoned his jeans, pushed them down toward his knees, and then allowed himself to fall back on the bed. Closing his eyes, he concentrated on each breath for a moment. In. Out. In. Out. Hoping to clear his mind. Lately, he felt like he was going crazy, and worse, he felt crazy for feeling that way. He'd defied all odds, he'd gotten the transplant, and here he was, a year later, with a fucking new lease on life. So why wasn't he happy?

Kai made sure his legs were unlocked and carefully slipped his feet out of his shoes, setting them aside. Next, he pulled off his jeans, and was about to toss them toward his shoes when he hesitated. Fishing his rescue inhaler out of his right front pocket, he laid it on the bedside table before tossing his jeans toward his bag. Maybe it was all in his head, but if it wasn't, the last thing he needed to do was scare Nikki. He had barely talked with her about his FS, and he knew she wouldn't know what to expect if . . . if he needed to use his inhaler again. Not that he even entirely knew what to expect anymore. *Fuck*. Wasn't that part of the problem?

Sighing, Kai rubbed his thigh with the heel of his hand before slowly undoing the straps that bound his right leg into the KAFO. Once free, he carefully lifted out his leg, setting the brace against the bed, and peeling off the brace sock, eager to expose his skin to air. He rubbed the palms of his hands along his legs, from thigh to calf. These braces—leather for the thigh and modeled plastic for the calf—fit him better than any other pair he'd ever used, but in the heat of the late Iowa summer, he was still grateful to be done with them for the day, his skin damp and slightly irritated despite the sock.

Repeating the motions, he removed his left brace, then set both out of the way and slipped under the sheet. He tried to keep his eyes open, to wait for Nikki, one eye on the far side of the apartment, but soon exhaustion overcame him and he slipped into sleep.

In his dream, his mind returned to the weeks before his transplant, the respirator barely enough to keep his blood oxygenated. The pain—from the machine, from persistent oxygen-deprivation neuropathy—meant he was sedated most of the time, and when he wasn't, his mind swam in a fog. Every time he woke, his mind grasping at a semblance of lucidity, he'd expected to be dead; half the time, before the haze of confusion cleared enough for him to *feel*, he'd think he was. Fire and brimstone couldn't be worse than that hell, of wishing for death, of praying that the worst news was coming. That he'd finally crossed the threshold he'd been teetering on for weeks, and someone—probably Dr. J—would be by to break the hard news that no transplant would come because he was simply too sick to undergo surgery.

In reality, he had woken, vision blurry, mind a blur, to a face—to this day, he wasn't sure whose—Jon's? Dr. Johnsen's? Jo's?—telling him they'd found a match and they were going to start prepping him for surgery. But this dream was different. The confusion was there, the vision that he couldn't quite clear with blinking. Curly hair, hovering near his chin, a face he couldn't quite distinguish.

Was his dream merging with wakefulness? Groggy, he felt the back of a small hand along his cheek, stroking the skin, soft curls grazing the stubble.

"Becca," he signed reflexively, the ASL "B" merging with the sign for "beautiful," hand swept over his face, a smile tipping his cheeks.

He accepted the kiss, warm lips against his, uncertain if this were dream or life, realizing something was wrong. Taste. Smell. Becca never wore perfumes or any scent that would irritate his FS; before the respirator stole his sense of smell and taste, her skin and hair had always had a faint aroma of soap, mild shampoo, coffee, and her innate *Beccaness*, a sweetness all her own that he'd clung to. Right now, his senses were assaulted with fruit, overpowering and tangy like a tropical drink.

Confused, Kai blinked several times more, finally seeming to wake fully from his dream. The face that hovered near his, surrounded by medium brown curls, was Nikki's. Nikki, wearing

a wig.

Kai's face drew into a deep scowl, and he pushed himself up quickly, causing her to fall back in surprise. "What the fuck," he growled; it was a statement, not a question, still it demanded an answer.

Nikki frowned, but it was a shallow expression, her face impassive as she shrugged, pulling the wig off and tossing her hair; loose strands stuck up and clung together from the static of the wig.

"I thought you'd like it."

Kai shook his head, realizing he was breathing hard. "I come to you exactly because you're *not* her."

"OK," Nikki said slowly, twirling the crown of the wig around her finger as if it were a hoop and she were a circus performer. "Then what about the girl from the party the other night? What was that all about?"

Kai's bites had finally healed enough they lay exposed on each shoulder, although the marks were still there. Neither of them had spoken of the events of the previous Friday, either the party itself or anything after, and Kai had hoped to keep it that way.

After taking a few steady, deep breaths, Kai responded, "That's exactly why it was a mistake."

Nikki tossed the wig in the air and caught it, staring at it for a moment in her hands before throwing it toward the kitchen. "All right. Bad idea. Sorry."

She reached for him, but he held up one hand to stop her, a slight shake of his head.

They sat in silence for a moment, listening to the sounds of each others' breathing. Nikki waited for Kai to look at her, then mimicked Becca's name sign. "You did this in your sleep. Does that mean Becca?"

Kai hesitated for a moment, finally nodding. He rubbed the back of his neck, staring at the rubber band on his wrist. "Sign language still feels more natural to me, especially when I'm half awake," he said with a mirthless laugh. Kai had first started speech therapy the summer between eighth and ninth grade—eight years ago—but he still considered spoken English very much a second language.

Nikki risked smoothing a hand along his arm, fingers trailing onto his chest. "I think you're sexy when you sign. Especially your facial expressions."

Kai managed a laugh; not quite his full, relaxed chuckle, but his anger was fading. "You haven't even seen me sign much."

"Maybe," Nikki said, lifting her hand to his cheek, cradling it. "But I've had a lot of time to study your face."

Kai studied her eyes for a moment, enjoying the feel of her skin against his, forgetting about his dream, the wig, everything for this brief moment of connection between them.

"Facial expressions in ASL are like tone in spoken language; they help convey meaning to your signs. Like in spoken English, you inflect your voice to indicate a question. Most people never think about it. In ASL how you move your eyebrows can not only indicate you're asking something, but whether or not it's a yes or no question."

Nikki laughed as he raised his brows, leaning forward to plant a simple kiss on his lips. "I'll keep that in mind, professor."

He frowned, then shrugged. "Nearly five years total of speech therapy, plus more than double that of Deaf education. It's hard for me not to think like that sometimes." He picked at the rubber band but didn't snap it. "It's like moving to a foreign country where you know the language, you're fluent, and it's comfortable, but it'll never be as familiar as the language you grew up with."

Nikki folded her legs and smiled at him, leaning forward to place a playful peck on the tip of his long nose. "Sign something for me. Anything."

"Nikki . . ."

“Please?”

She watched as his hands moved quickly in the air in front of him, his face a mixture of annoyance and amusement; she loved how he could master keeping his face a blank mask and yet also combine emotions so well on it.

“So what does that mean?”

“It means you’re a pain in the ass,” he said, repeating the signs.

“Do you have a sign for me, like with Becca? That means my name?”

“A name sign? Yeah.” Kai demonstrated, sweeping his fingers over his forehead, bringing them into a fist, thumb between his fingers, two on each side of it, combing the sign for “forget” with the letter “N.”

“Does it mean anything? I mean, other than ‘Nikki’?”

Kai sighed. “Yeah. ‘Forget,’ because that’s what you help me do.”

“What?” She took his fingers in her hands, smoothing over the rounded fingertips.

“Everything. Before.” Kai lay back, staring up at the ceiling, flicking the rubber band gently against his wrist. “That I’m not normal and never will be. That I’m probably deluding myself in thinking I can ever even have a ‘normal’ life. . . . That I can ever even *have* a life,” Kai said, his voice trailing off to a whisper.

Nikki edged closer to him, leaning over to take his head in her hands, kissing him softly. “Then let me help. Let me do my job. Let me make you forget, if only for a night.”

September 2, 2000

Jon smoothed a hand over his hair as he passed the kitchen table to grab his briefcase. Kai sat in his wheelchair, hunched over a bowl of cereal, a textbook open beside him. He'd gotten in late from Nikki's the night before, electing, at the last minute, not to spend the night, and the combination of a restless mind and body had meant he hadn't gotten much sleep.

"So I have patients all morning, but my last one is at 11:30, so I should be free by one." Jon peered into his briefcase before slinging it over his shoulder. "I thought maybe we could have lunch. Do something together? Whatever you want."

Kai set his spoon in his bowl and leaned back to better see his brother, unable to hide the surprise in his face. "Sure. But I'm going to stick to the chair today, I think, so . . ." Kai shrugged and returned to his cereal.

Jon frowned.

"I'm fine."

Jon looked at Kai, one eyebrow raised, but said nothing, waiting for his brother to look up, as if the tension in the air would be enough to signal him.

Kai sighed heavily, tossed his head, before meeting his brother's eyes. "Really. I'm just tired, and I don't want to have to miss any more class by pushing myself too hard."

Jon studied his brother for a moment, even though Kai had dropped his head again, pushing his cereal out of the way and pulling his textbook closer, seemingly engrossed in reading what was apparently a psychology text. Realizing Kai was in full-on ignore mode, Jon sunk into the chair diagonally opposite with a sigh.

"Maybe twelve hours is too much."

Kai gripped the top far corner of the open book in his hand, fingers curling around the pages, squeezing and releasing in a repetitive, anxious motion. "That's the minimum for matriculation."

"Then maybe you don't need to be a full-time student. Maybe you should have taken just a couple classes your first semester. You know, eased yourself into it."

Kai let out a harsh breath and released the pages; they made a loud *fwap* as they fell back into place. "Jon. I'm *fine*," Kai said, signing the word for emphasis, a thumb on his chest, fingers splayed, jerking his hand down stiffly. "All right? I'll see you later for lunch."

Jon's lips squeezed tightly together, resisting a frown. "All right. Well." He pushed himself up, readjusted his briefcase. "It's still not too late to drop a class or two. I'll see you later. Cattle Baron, one o'clock." Jon patted Kai's shoulder briefly before turning to the door.

As soon as Kai heard the front door click shut, he dropped his head on the book with a small thud. Jon had a legitimate point. Four classes hadn't seemed like much when he'd registered, but now that he actually had twelve hours of lecture a week and at least that much reading, things seemed different. He couldn't focus or remember nearly as well as he could in high school, but he figured minor cognitive deficits were a fairly small price to pay considering that he'd nearly died of lung failure only a little over a year ago.

Maybe trying college again was just another way he was fooling himself. With a grunt, he pushed himself up and shut the book. He needed to clear his head. He'd hit the pool, get a good workout early before any of the swimming classes started, then maybe drop by Lost Apple Books and try to study for a while. A change of scenery might do him good, and it'd force him to catch up on the work he missed last week.

The parking lot for Lost Apple Books was nearly empty when Kai pulled in after his workout. The store didn't open for another thirty minutes, but Kai knew the owner, Arthur Meyers, was likely already puttering about, dusting the shelves and making sure everything was ready for the

Saturday crowd. He lived above the store, which he'd owned since before Kai was born, and had somehow managed to survive the big retail chains and the burgeoning internet market. He and his store were a town institution, partially because he was impossible to dislike. He volunteered in the community, wasn't afraid to lend someone a book they couldn't afford, or do any number of small things that made Lost Apple more than just a book store.

Best of all, it was extremely accessible; Art had made sure of that, carefully arranging the shelves and furniture, always asking someone to help make sure he hadn't made any oversights. He wanted everyone to feel welcome at Lost Apple, and so far, he'd succeeded well.

Kai had only just pulled into the lot when a blur of dark curly hair jogged in front of him, forcing him to hit the brakes. For a moment, their eyes met: Renee. *Fuck*. Because Iowa required two license plates, if Renee noticed, saw the wheelchair logo, saw the hand controls, she'd know his "bad leg" was more than just an old football injury. *Fuck. Fuck*. She moved out of his way, and for a moment, he thought he'd be able to gun it, but he was in such a state of shocked panic, before he could react, he heard a rap on his window. *Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck*.

He glanced over, doing his best to smile, and saw Renee, beaming, waving. The girl definitely had enthusiasm, Kai would give her that. Sucking in a breath but keeping his smile up, Kai rolled down the window.

"Hey!" Renee said with a grin. "What are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same thing."

Renee tilted her head to one side and laughed, a low, delicate chuckle. "I work here Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday. Today's my first day."

Kai rubbed his eyes and then his face. "Oh. Well, you'll like working here."

"Yeah, I hung out here a bit last year. I'm just glad he needed some help. I could definitely use the money." Renee blushed.

"Art's a good man. When I was a kid, he used to . . ." Kai stopped himself, realizing how Renee made him drop his guard, nearly relating a story about his childhood he wasn't ready to divulge. The less Renee knew about his past, the better. ". . . let me borrow books," Kai finished vaguely.

Art was very active in the community, and each year would do a book drive for County House, bringing the donated books to the group home so the kids would have something to read. Even though Kai didn't speak then, and Art didn't know more than the alphabet and a few signs, they'd formed a bond over books. Reading was one of the few things Kai could do when he was sick, and so Art would occasionally bring a book just for Kai to read, acting almost like a library for him. Kai would read the book, then exchange it with Art for another the next time they saw each other. Art even visited Kai in the hospital occasionally, and they'd talk books (with Kai writing out his part of the conversation), or sometimes, Art would just read to him. Art was one of the few people who'd really shown him kindness, and he'd never forgotten that. In fact, he still had his worn copy of *Hamlet* that Art had given him, and which he'd read so many times he'd memorized it. In high school, Kai had read parts of it out loud to himself in the privacy of his room to help him build his confidence with spoken English.

*To sleep, perchance to Dream; Aye, there's the rub,
For in that sleep of death, what dreams may come,
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
. . . makes us rather bear those ills we have,
Than fly to others that we know not of.*

Sensing Kai's distraction, Renee cleared her throat, then gestured toward the building with her thumb. "We don't open for another thirty minutes, but I doubt Art would mind if you came in with me. When there's a lull, I'm sure he would let us study together."

Kai stared at her for a moment, his heart pounding furiously against his chest, cursing

himself that he didn't wear his orthotics. *This is what I get for being lazy.* Looking past her to the store, he said, "Actually, I just realized I have some errands to run first. But I had a really nice time yesterday. Rain check?"

It occurred to Kai that Renee might ask Art about him; if so, there wasn't much Kai could do about it. He'd just have to cross that bridge when he came to it, and prepare himself for Renee treating him differently once she knew about his past and his health. Maybe she'd be OK with it; after all, she hadn't said anything about his leg or walk yesterday. Her disinterest didn't seem feigned or forced; instead, she'd made small talk, flirted, as if his leg didn't matter. Would she maintain her interest if she knew the truth? Kai didn't realize he was biting his lip until he tasted the metallic tang of blood on his tongue.

"Sure," Renee said with a grin. "Actually . . ." she reached into her bag and grabbed a pen, then leaned into the car and pulled out his arm. With a seductive smile, she wrote on his forearm.

Kai tried to see what she was writing, but wasn't able to, partially because he was distracted by the strangely sensual sensation of her pen imprinting on his skin and her soft, smooth fingertips as they braced his arm.

"My number. Call me some time. If you can't make class, or you want to study, or . . . you want to do something else," she said with a smile, her cheeks flushed.

Kai glanced at the numbers, mostly as an excuse to hide his eyes from her, as the thought flashed in his head. What if he pulled into one of the handicapped spots and whipped out his chair, put everything on the table? No more pretense. It would be a relief. And he'd save himself from getting . . . attached. One way or another, the chair, braces, crutches weren't going anywhere; maybe it'd be better to know if it was something she could deal with rather than leading both of them along?

The feel of her fingertips on the inside of his wrist, just below the rubber band, sent a frisson up his spine, drawing his attention away from his thoughts, strengthening his resolve. Bridges crossed when gotten to, he thought, smiling.

"I'd better get going. I'll see you Wednesday, if not before." Her grin was sweet and simple, and Kai watched as her curls bobbed behind her when she skipped away toward the building.

He exhaled a long breath. She'd given him her number. Gimpy leg and everything. He couldn't help smiling as he turned his car around, feeling excited and a little giddy.

A few minutes later, Kai found himself parked at a table in the diner, absently flicking the rubber band against his wrist, unable to stop thinking about Renee.

A ruddy, slightly wrinkled hand set a mug of hot milk on the table in front of him. "Nikki's off today," Marge said, causing Kai to look up and manage a faint smile. She was staring at the wheelchair, frowning; Kai realized he'd never come into the diner when he wasn't walking.

"I know," Kai said, giving the band an extra forceful flick.

"Pies are in the oven, since it's so early."

Kai laughed, cradled the back of his neck with one hand. "That's OK. How 'bout a waffle." Marge grinned. "Let me guess: with strawberries and whipped cream."

Kai nodded, returning the smile, feeling himself relax a bit. "That sounds great." Then he quickly added sugar to his milk and stirred, lifting the mug to his lips and taking a tentative sip. Too hot. Marge always heated it too much.

Marge tapped her pen on her ordering pad and winked. "Waffle shouldn't take long. You let me know if you need anything else."

Kai nodded and laid his forearm on the table, staring at Renee's handwriting, elegant, angular, and neat against his fair skin. He was so lost in his thoughts he didn't hear someone collapse into the chair opposite him until an extremely deep male voice spoke.

"I know you've got some brain damage, but don't tell me you've forgotten what your arm

looks like.”

Kai snapped his head up to see a face he hadn't seen in a while: Jake Wahltukh, Kai's only real hearing friend. Jake was a large man, with bronze skin and long, mahogany hair plaited into two braids that draped over his shoulders toward his waist. As far as Kai knew, Jake hadn't cut his hair for more than a trim since his father had died when he was a kid.

Jake and Kai had met on the first day of high school. Kai had been exhausted and a little terrified as he'd made his way to the state-required fifth period PE class, a class the district would never let him participate in. It was also Kai's first time at a hearing school since the state had forced him to “try it” after his parents had died, convinced allowing him to continue to attend the deaf school was only encouraging his “stubbornness” in refusing to speak.

Kai had only had speech therapy for a few months, and his MLS immediately made him stand out even without the language barrier. But Jake had seen beyond both these things; a target for teasing and racist jokes his whole life, Jake had learned early to walk his own path and not give the other kids the satisfaction of letting their jibes bite him. Over the four years of high school, he'd done his best to learn ASL, and had even helped Kai practice his speech to build his confidence. Then, in college, Jake had continued to pursue sign language, eventually qualifying for his interpreter's license.

“Jake. Wow. It's been awhile.”

Jake beamed. He had a long face and wide cheekbones. His dark brown, nearly black eyes could easily have been menacing, yet they were soft and kind. “*You look a hell of a lot better than the last time I saw you.*” Jake said, shifting to ASL.

“*Yeah, well . . .*” Kai signed with a wave of his hand.

Jake sipped his coffee, which he'd apparently brought over with him, and eyed Kai, his face warm. One-handed, he signed, “*I guess you're doing OK now?*”

Kai shrugged.

Jake frowned and set his coffee aside, freeing up his other hand. “*I see you haven't changed. Come on. No BS.*”

Kai patted his pushrims with each palm, buying himself some time. “*I don't know what way's up anymore. And my legs have been more stubborn than a drunk Indian.*” Kai signed, poking fun at Jake's Dakota-Sioux heritage.

Jake laughed. “*At least I'm not a skinny, racist white boy.*”

“Hey, not so skinny anymore,” Kai said with a grin, extending a hand, which Jake met in a tight shake, fists clasped together. “It's been a long time.”

“I know you can't live without me.” Jake cringed, his face suddenly growing serious. “*Sorry. Look . . .*”

Kai held up his hand to signal it was OK, shifting to the ASL sign for “fine,” turning his hand ninety degrees and tilting it toward Jake.

Jake nodded, although he still looked apologetic.

Jake had gone out of state for college, but he'd made a point of visiting Kai whenever he was in town, especially the last year before Kai's transplant. Despite the fact that Jake had been one of Kai's only true friends, Jake still felt guilty that he hadn't been able to be more there for Kai when things were really bad.

“*Really. I don't hold it against you because you decided to study abroad or do that summer internship with Doctors Without Borders.*” Kai's eyes were wide, his brows arched, head cocked, as if to say, *Come on.*

Jake sighed, picked up one braid and threaded his fingers through the end of it before letting it fall back against his chest. Jake hadn't seen Kai since Christmas break, a few months post-transplant, when Kai was still recovering, over eight months ago.

“*Speaking of. . . Started med school. Loyola Chicago.*”

Kai watched Jake's finger spelling, impressed with how rapidly his fingers moved now, a far cry from his awkward signing of high school. But the school name caused Kai's brows to arch

reflexively, thinking of Jenny. And Jon. He shoved the thoughts from his mind.

"Already had our first exam, if you can believe it. I'm just here for the weekend to visit my mom."

"Cool." Kai sipped his milk again; it had cooled enough to be palatable. *"You'll be a great doctor someday. I know it."*

"What?" Jake's eyebrows jumped up, a grin curling across his face. *"No 'Medicine Man' joke? You're slipping."*

"Fuck you," Kai said, laughing, smiling as Marge delivered their food; the Lumberjack breakfast for Jake (which Kai assumed Jake must have ordered before joining him), and Kai's waffle.

With an added grin and wink toward Kai, she set a plate of bacon on the table. "On the house, hon. Can I get you guys anything else?"

Kai glanced at Jake, who shook his head. "We're good. Thanks, Marge."

"She thinks you're cute," Jake teased, dumping half a bottle's worth of ketchup on his plate.

Kai bit his lip and said nothing, offering Jake his bacon.

Jake eyed it hungrily, despite the fact that he had enough food in front of him to feed a small country—eggs, potatoes, bacon, sausage, ham, pancakes, toast. "You're giving me your bacon?"

Kai shrugged. *"I'm a vegetarian now."*

Jake stopped with one slice of bacon halfway to his mouth, eyebrow raised.

Kai sighed, dumping syrup onto his waffle. *"Supposed to help with my MLS,"* he signed one-handedly.

"And that's really working out for you I see," Jake said teasingly, gesturing toward Kai's chair with the bacon.

Kai replaced the syrup on the table to free his hand. *"Fuck you,"* he signed again, but he was smiling. *"I've missed this."*

Jake nodded, scooping up some food onto a fork. "I'm really glad to see you looking so good."

"It's good to be feeling good," Kai signed as he chewed some waffle. *"And your ASL is even better than the last time we talked."*

Jake shrugged and set down his fork. *"It helps when I cruise by the deaf school to pick up all the hot Deafie girls."*

Kai nearly choked on his food with laughter. *"I'll bet."*

Jake sighed, shoveled food into his mouth. *"Instead of my ASL interpreter's license, I should have focused on Spanish. Turns out that's a lot more useful for medicine."*

For a moment, Kai stared at his food, drumming his fingers on the table. Taking in a breath, he raised his hands to add, *"I wish more nurses and doctors knew it."*

An awkward pause descended on the table as they ate, forks scraping against plates. A young waitress Kai didn't recognize stopped by to refill Jake's coffee.

"You think you'll come back here? Once you finish school?"

Jake washed down a mouthful of food with some coffee before responding. "I don't know. If I did, it'd be after residency. I kinda like the anonymity of the big city, you know? Everyone knows me here, but in Chicago or St. Louis or wherever, I'm just another guy."

Kai nodded and slipped a gooey forkful into his mouth.

"What about you? You ever think of leaving this place?"

Kai shrugged, dragged the tines of his fork through the syrup, creating a ragged trail that rapidly resealed itself. *"Right now, it's one day at a time."*

Jake pointed to Kai's arm. "So what's with the arm? Planning your tattoo?"

Kai glanced down at the numbers again, smoothing over his skin with his other hand. "Her name's Renee," Kai said, unable to hide a blush.

Jake shook his head. "I guess blonds really do have all the fun."

Kai rolled his eyes and sipped his milk.

Leaning forward, Jake studied Kai for a moment, as if trying to read between the lines; as good as Kai was at concealing himself, Jake had been too close a friend for much to escape his scrutiny.

"She's cool with the wheels, etc.?"

Kai suddenly seemed very intent on dissecting the remains of his waffle.

"She doesn't know," Jake said after a long pause, voice flat.

Kai tapped his fingers a few times on the table before sighing and looking up. "Most days my walk is good. No crutches or anything. She knows I have a 'bad leg,' but no, I haven't sat her down to tell her my life sob story," Kai signed bitterly, his face looking like he'd sucked hard on a lemon.

"And you don't think she has a right to know?" Jake accused, jabbing his fork toward Kai before spearing eggs and shoving them in his mouth.

"Jesus, Jake." Kai pushed his plate as far away from him as he could, a fermenting pit forming in his stomach. "I've known her two weeks. *Excuse me if I want her to get to know me before springing General Hospital on her.*"

Jake barely contained a chortle. "Not touching that. Too easy."

Kai shrugged. "In the hospital, it was soaps or the shopping channel." He sighed. "I like her, and she likes me. I don't want to fuck this up."

Jake shoveled some food into his mouth, then dropped his fork to free up his hands so he could sign while he chewed. "I'm no expert on women, but last time I checked, lying is a pretty good way to fuck things up."

Kai snapped the rubber band against his wrist a few times. "I'm not lying. . . . I'm just . . . not . . . telling her everything. . . . Yet."

"Lies of omission are still lies. I'm not saying you need to give her *Kai Taylor Fox: The Unabridged Story*, but . . ."

"She's bound to find out sooner or later, or at least start to put the pieces together. I don't know. I guess I just wanted to try to have one relationship where it was just about me and her without any . . . complications. You know? *Am I crazy?*"

"Well, I hope it works out. It's about time you got over she-who-shall-not-be-named." Jake stared hard at Kai. "But life's about complications. You can't hide from that."

Renee watched Art demonstrate how to make coffee in the large restaurant-style machines he kept tucked into a back nook of the store.

"People are always telling me I should charge for the stuff, or eliminate it completely. 'Don't want people parking and mooching,' they tell me." Art shrugged, pressing a couple buttons to start the brewing. "But I've always been a stubborn fool."

He grinned and turned to Renee. Art was about a foot taller than her, likely a meaty man in his youth, although his paunchy belly dominated his figure now. His skin was dry and ruddy, his eyebrows a bushy weave of black and white wiry hair, and the dome of his skull was dusted with only the faintest wisps, revealing his spotted skin below. His face was round and friendly, with ice-blue eyes that sparkled as if lit from some inner light. He seemed the archetypal grandfather figure.

"I'm sure your customers appreciate the free coffee, Mr. Meyers," Renee said quietly.

Art laughed. "As I said in the interview: Art, please. And I know they do. Part of what sets Lost Apple apart." He cleared his throat. "Just make sure to refresh the coffee throughout the day, and that we have cups and sugar and all that. Pretty easy." He took off toward the storeroom, his long strides forcing Renee to jog to catch up. "Have some copies just in of a book from a local author. He should be in next week for a signing, but want to get some out on the front table for display."

He almost seemed to be talking to himself, muttering as he peeked through half-opened cardboard boxes along the floor.

"Ah, here we go," he said. He glanced over at her. "You think you can carry this?" He heaved up a smaller box packed with paperbacks.

"Of course," she said, although she wasn't certain. She didn't want Art to regret hiring her petite self.

"Great," Art said, settling the box in her arms and grabbing another.

The box was heavy, but small, and so Renee did her best to carry it effortlessly toward the front display. She could hear Art lumbering behind her as they walked through the wide main aisle.

This half of the store was roughly rectangular, with bookshelves built into the walls and stacked at intervals in neat rows on each side of the aisle. The far back corner held the coffee bar and a few chairs, with the office, storeroom, and private door leading to the steps for Art's apartment on the opposite side. Toward the middle, a second, perpendicular aisle sloped down toward the second half of the store, a later addition to the building. This open space featured tables, chairs, and an assortment of small couches, and was where Art allowed local groups, like book clubs and writing circles, to meet.

The front of this portion of the store was more open, the register on one side and tables for featured books greeting customers as they entered through double glass doors etched with the store logo, bookended by large picture windows.

The early morning sun spilled in, casting pale yellow squares of light onto one of the tables, where a sign advertised the book and the upcoming signing. Renee set the box on it, waiting for Art's instructions. Without a word, he began unpacking and stacking copies, so Renee followed suit.

"Mr. Meyers—" She quickly corrected herself in response to his cleared throat and raised brow. "Art. Do you know Kai Fox?"

Art paused and looked at her. "You mean Kai Taylor?"

Renee tilted her head, confused by the different last name, but found it unlikely they were two Kais in this town. "He said his name was Fox."

Art stacked a few more books, seeming to consider this for a moment before nodding. "Probably did. Hasn't gone by Taylor in a few years." Without waiting for another word from Renee, Art continued, "So, yes, I know him. Known him all his life. His parents, too. Shame about them," Art muttered, seemingly to himself.

That piqued Renee's interest. She recalled Kai saying it was only him and his brother. But why change his last name?

"Anyway, he's a great kid." Art evened out a stack of books, guiding them between two hands. "Why you want to know?"

Renee dipped her head, trying to hide her blush.

Art laughed, rich and deep. "So he's caught your eye, has he?"

Renee forced herself to look up, even though she knew her cheeks were still hot. "That obvious, huh?"

Art met her eyes, his face serious, gesturing with one of the books. "You be careful with him. You hear? He's been though a lot."

Renee's eyebrows dipped. "What do you mean?"

Art frowned and reached down to collapse the now empty box. "Not really my business to tell. You'll have to ask him."

Before Renee could think of what else to say, Art had stalked off toward the storage room, leaving Renee to finish stacking the rest of the novels alone.

Kai sat in his car outside the diner. He and Jake had exchanged current numbers, and Kai had entered Renee's into his address book on his phone, which he held in his hand, trying to decide

what to do. He still had a few hours until his lunch with Jon, and knew he needed to study, but Lost Apple was off the books unless he was willing to go home for his braces. He could hit the library, or find a bench in one of the quads, or even try one of the study rooms in the student center. No. It had to be library or home, so he could focus.

Kai let his head fall back against the headrest, sighing, thinking back to the conversation he'd had that morning with his brother. Maybe Jon was right, and he should drop a class or two. But which ones? If he dropped Intro to Psych, he'd be screwing himself for his major. And if he dropped his core classes, it would mean seeing Renee a lot less. As fucked up as everything was right now, Kai realized seeing less of her wasn't an option. No. He'd stick with it. He didn't need A's; he was content to pass, to survive the semester. If he needed a tutor, or to suck it up and drop by disability services to get tested, then he would. Thinking of Renee made a warm feeling bubble up in his stomach, and he flipped open his phone. She was at work, he knew, but he could leave her a message. Maybe she'd want to get together Monday to go over a few things? Maybe she'd have some tips for helping him remember all those dates in history? Or . . . he could go home, put on his braces, and hang out at Lost Apple Books as he'd originally planned. Even if Renee was too busy to study with him, just being in the same space as her, their gazes meeting whenever she passed. . . . He smiled. It might not be the most conducive studying environment, but. . . .

Before he could set his phone down to back out of the parking space, it began to ring in his hand. He didn't recognize the number, but answered anyway, putting it to his ear.

"Kai?" A female voice, achingly familiar.

"Becca." Kai felt as if his stomach had fallen through him into the center of the earth, a wave of nausea so intense it took his breath away. He knew he should hang up, tell her to go fuck herself—that's what Nikki would do. But he was frozen, barely able to breathe.

Silence so long, she repeated his name.

"I'm . . . here," Kai said, surprised he could find his voice.

"How . . . how are you?"

Kai swallowed hard, but said nothing.

Becca's sigh came out harshly over the phone. "I'll be in town at the end of the week. Meet me?"

Kai's surprise morphed to anger, and he replied, his voice bitter, "And what would you say if I told you I was too sick to meet you?"

The only sound from Becca's end was the rasp of her breath.

"Yeah, that's what I thought," he snarled, snapping the phone shut with a loud clap. He threw the phone toward the passenger's seat, then slammed his hands on the steering wheel, clenching his teeth and eyes, biting down hard on his lip.

Fuck her, and fuck studying, Kai thought, peeling out of the parking lot.

The pool at the Y was pretty much off limits on Saturdays after nine because of swim lessons, and though the weight room was tempting, the allure of losing himself for forty laps drew him to the university's fitness complex instead. The muffling silence of water, allowing his mind to blank as he crawled toward one wall, then the next, over and over until his chest and arms and hips ached.

Kai hadn't yet visited the school gym or pool, partially out of habit, but the contrast in facilities between the Y and the university were immediately stark and apparent. The center hummed with activity, but he wouldn't have to worry about six-year-olds hogging the pool here. He might have to consider changing his routine.

The girl at the check-in counter had asked if he needed help.

"You know, like, with the doors or getting in the pool and stuff." She'd looked at him, annoyed, as if praying he'd say no so she wouldn't be inconvenienced.

He'd told her no, and quickly made his way to the pool locker room, grateful he kept a

spare suit and lock in his car. He did need help, but more like a shrink than someone to open a door for him. Anger still burned under the surface of his skin. Why did Becca still affect him so strongly?

Because just when he thought things were getting better, she'd reassert herself on his life. She'd done it before, and she was doing it again. He sighed heavily, pushing past other guys, oblivious to the looks and stares until he found an empty aisle. He heaved his bag off his lap and tossed it on the bench, fishing through it, pulling out his suit. Becca continued to hurt him because he let her. As long as he allowed her to, she had power over him. It'd be best if he severed himself from her. Ignored her calls, pushed her from his mind. He had an opportunity with Renee now, and as terrifying as the prospect of another relationship was, he knew he wanted to give her a chance.

Kai examined the suit. It was his old one, and had seen better days, but it'd do in a pinch. A competition suit, more specialized than simple trunks, it covered him from knee to neck, leaving his arms free. Difficult to put on, even with the zippered back, but it hid his scars. Hiding. Was that all he did anymore? At school, with Renee, even with Nikki and Jon. In fact, he realized, his time with Nikki was as much about forgetting as it was *hiding*. He bent, pulled off one shoe, then another, tossing them in the locker. Hesitating for a moment, he gripped the fabric of his shirt, yanking it over his head, setting it on the hook. He fingered his trachea scar. Maybe he wasn't ready to tell Renee everything, but he was ready to be done with Becca. If she didn't call back, he would. He'd agree to meet her, and he'd tell her they were finished, and she could leave him to get on with his life.

Jon shifted his weight in the chair, glanced at his watch for the ten-hundredth time, smiling weakly at the waiter who refilled his water. It was almost two-thirty; Kai was late. Jon had been forced to eat, his blood sugar too low to wait for his brother, but he'd already tried Kai's cell and checked the apartment, all with no luck. So he'd decided to come back to the restaurant, wait another hour before he called the hospital. Maybe Kai was studying in the library, phone off, and had lost track of time? Worry pulsed in Jon's gut as he clenched his water glass and drank.

Jon turned his gaze to the wide arched entrance to the dining room, a rush of relief flooding through his body when he saw Kai finally appear, pushing his way toward the table. But something was wrong. Kai didn't guide his chair with his usual force or grace; every stroke seemed to take immense effort. He looked pained and tired, which surprised Jon even more, since Kai normally hid his emotions, at least initially. Kai's hair was damp, making the golden almost brown, long strands clinging together.

Kai seemed to notice Jon for the first time as he drew near, offering a faint apologetic smile. A few more strokes, and he parked at the table across from his brother.

Jon opened his mouth to speak, but before he could, Kai did. "I'm fine, just tired. I'm sorry I'm late. I'm sorry I didn't call. I lost track of time. Did you eat? Please tell me you did." He said it in the same way one would read items on a grocery list, but as if he were repeating himself for the sixth time, growing tired, a little frustrated. *Bread. Milk. Butter. Yes, butter. Juice. Do we need juice?*

"I was worried," Jon said simply. "And yes, I ate."

"Good," Kai replied with a slight nod, linking his fingers and stretching long arms above his head.

Awkward silence descended on the table. Kai shifted his weight, tried to avoid his brother's stare. After several minutes, a waitress appeared, and Kai ordered a baked potato, smiling at her as he handed her his menu.

"Nothing for me," Jon said, not able to mirror his brother's smile. Once the waitress was gone, Jon pursed his lips and stared at his brother, who still refused to meet his gaze. "How many meters?" His tone was flat.

"What?" Kai responded, annoyance coloring his words, grabbing one of the shakers and

tapping it anxiously on the table. *Tap. Tap tap. Tap. Tap tap tap tap.*

Jon inclined his chin toward his brother, noticing again the damp hair that clung to Kai's head.

Kai lifted his eyes just briefly before turning them back to his fingers gripping the shaker. "A thousand."

Jon did the quick math in his head. Forty laps. "How much did you do this morning?"

Kai's tapping halted abruptly, and he looked up at his brother, eyes narrowing. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Jon sighed heavily, reached across the table, and snatched the shaker out of his brother's hand. "Don't BS me. Every Saturday morning for the past four months you've gone to the Y to swim, before classes start and the little kids take over the pool."

"So maybe I didn't go this morning. Maybe I went before lunch, and that's why I'm late."

"You want to play this game? Fine." Jon stared down at the shaker, now in his hand, gave it a few annoyed taps, before huffing and pushing it aside. "What's going on?"

"Jon," Kai said, forcing his voice to be neutral. "I've lived almost my whole life without a father. I don't need one now."

Jon cradled his water glass, wiping condensation off onto his hands, trying to bite back how badly Kai's words had stung. "I just want to help."

Kai sighed, but it wasn't out of frustration, more like . . . acceptance. "You can't fix everything." Kai touched his brother's hand and their eyes met. "I'm not six anymore; I can deal with things by myself."

"I know you can," Jon said, his face pained. "That doesn't mean you have to."

Kai pulled away, leaning back in his chair, a faint smile gracing his face. "I love you, Jon. But some stuff I do have to handle on my own."

Jon and Kai had spent the rest of the afternoon and evening together in a kind of silent communion, trying to ignore the tension between them as much as possible. By ten, Kai had told Jon he'd decided to call it a night, and retired to his room, going through his nightly routine and determined to make a few important phone calls.

Kai sat on his bed, back against the wall, legs hanging off the edge. He was sore and tight everywhere from the double workout, but he didn't care. The extra swim had helped him clear his mind, and he knew what he needed to do.

Becca hadn't called again, so Kai went to his recent incoming calls and redialed the unfamiliar number from which she'd reached him before. It was possible he'd have no luck getting in touch with her. Fitting, even; she was around for him when she wanted, but if he needed her, that was another story. He frowned. No, he wasn't going to think like that. He had managed to push away nearly everything from his life pre-transplant, locking memories in the farthest reaches of his mind and sealing up any remembrances into a box he kept taped up in the back of his closet. He simply needed to add Becca to the list. And it needed to be done in person. While she might not have given him that benefit, he knew he'd only feel satisfied that things were well and truly over between them by looking her firmly in the eyes and telling her so himself.

The phone rang several times before a tired male voice answered. "Yeah?"

Kai swallowed, took a breath. "Is Becca there?"

Kai could almost hear the frown over the line, but shuffling sounds warped by the mic assaulted his ears, and the next voice he heard was hers.

"Yes?"

"Friday. The triangle quad, Jonesville U. Three."

"Kai?"

"You said you wanted to meet me. That's where I'll be, and when, if you want to talk." Without waiting for her to say anything else, he ended the call, letting out a breath. His chest felt

tight, and he breathed slowly for a few minutes before releasing the air and dialing Renee.

She picked up after only the second ring. "Hello?"

Kai held the phone with his neck, then used his hands to help pull his right knee up onto the bed. He was stiff, but he'd been worse.

"Hey, it's Kai."

He stretched his foot with his hands, knowing he'd have to stretch properly later, after he finished his calls.

"Hey," she said; he could hear the smile in her voice.

"I know there's some kind of unwritten rule about how long you should wait until you call someone after they've given you their number, but . . . I couldn't wait. Didn't want to wait."

"It's a silly rule anyway," she said, and he knew she was glowing. Even though he couldn't see it, he could sense it, her mood coloring her words.

"I figure since you're so far from home and you hadn't left yet, you're not going anywhere for the holiday," Kai said, the words coming in a rush as his heart beat quicker in his chest. "I was just wondering if you were doing anything Monday."

The line was silent for a moment, until finally Renee gasped, "Yes! I . . . uh . . . mean . . . no. I'm free Monday. My roommate won't be back till late. . . . But what about your brother? Don't you want to spend the holiday with him?"

"Jon's working. He's a doctor and likes to work holidays so he can see patients who can't get work off other days." Kai gripped his toes in one hand, flexing them, trying to break the cycle of contractions that had seized them.

"Huh. My doctor back home didn't even work Fridays, let alone holidays. What did you have in mind?"

Kai grinned, bit back a wince, and slowly let his hip rotate, his leg falling in a V, knee still bent. "I thought . . . maybe we could study? Get something to eat?"

She didn't answer immediately.

"Oh. Um. Unless you don't want to," he said a little crestfallen. He shifted the phone to his other shoulder and rubbed at the opposite one with his hand, pinching the muscle to relieve the tension.

"No! No." She cleared her throat. "That'd be great. We could go over some of the stuff you missed. Do you want to pick me up?"

Kai swallowed. He'd said no hiding, but the moment she got a good look at his car, saw the way he drove, spied the spare crutches he always kept in the backseat, any illusions he had of telling her at his own pace would burst and disappear. It'd leave an awkwardness that would color the whole day. Either because she was afraid to ask, or because he'd feel the need to explain everything and she'd be mad or weirded out or just treat him differently.

"Kai?"

Now it was his turn to clear his throat. "I'm here. Sorry. Uh, I think it'd work better if I just met you somewhere. Is that OK?" Kai's right calf twitched, and he rubbed at it with one hand, gripping the phone with the other.

The disappointment clung to her words. "Sure. I understand. Where do you want to meet up?"

The thought of inviting her to the apartment flashed through his mind, but if he couldn't even pick her up, then how could he invite her here? Besides, they'd only known each other two weeks. He might be a little naive, but not that much.

"Uh, you know that sandwich shop off Main?"

"The one with the sign that says, 'Best Chicken Salad in the Midwest' in the window?"

"That's it. They'll be open tomorrow, but probably not real busy. Most of their business will be catering, takeout, that type of thing. We can hang out in the back for a few hours; the owners won't mind." Kai pushed his right leg straight, braced the knee, and focused on flexing his ankle, pointing his toes toward his body, trying to get the calf muscles to relax. The muscles

didn't respond immediately, a couple toes catching in spasm, but he concentrated, working through it.

"Do you know everyone in this town?" Renee said playfully, laughing.

Kai frowned, picked at the fabric of his pants. "No. But they know me." Before she could get a chance to ask for clarification, he said, "12:30 tomorrow. See you there. Bye."

Although it was late and he was tired, his muscles tight, some spasming, he knew he couldn't sleep yet. He'd already taken his meds. His peak flow was slightly down, but he chalked it off to stress and over doing it. His body beckoned for a good stretch, some muscle relaxant, and rest, but he knew he had one more thing to do.

"Come in," Nikki said with a nod, stepping away from the door to let him in. "You look totally wiped."

He smiled faintly, crutching in slowly. Nikki's apartment door was too narrow for his chair, but she was right: he was exhausted. "It's been a long day."

Carefully planting each crutch, coaxing his right leg forward, then pulling his left along with his body, he worked his way toward her bed, sinking down with relief. His back was tight, joining the rest of his aches. He laid his crutches on the floor, tucked partially under the bed, slipped off his bag, then each shoe. A moment later, Nikki stood in front of him, offering him a mug.

"Microwaved, since that's faster. Already saturated it in honey, just like you like it." She sank down next to him, gripping her own mug.

"Thanks," he said, taking a sip.

They sat together in silence, side by side. His back was spasming; it bothered him rarely, especially if he wasn't using his crutches as much. Simply a price to pay for the day, he thought, knowing he was lucky he hadn't had a full-blown attack.

"So. Long day?" Nikki said, sipping her tea, trying to prompt him to speak.

Kai nodded, staring into his mug, gripped in both hands, enjoying the warmth that penetrated his skin. He thought he could do this, but now that he was here, his resolution wavered.

"Nikki . . ." Kai began, then took in a deep breath, his back complaining from the movement. "I owe you a lot." He took another breath, shallower this time. "You've taught me so much," he said with a subtle smile, looking up at her. "You've been there when I needed to forget. You put up with my fucked-up . . ." His brow crinkled. ". . . -ness." He laughed nervously, and felt her hand smoothing along the tight muscles of his lower back. "And you're sexy as hell. But . . ." Another deep breath, a wince. He dropped his eyes, then forced himself to lift them to hers.

Before he could continue, Nikki said, "You think we shouldn't see each other anymore."

Kai dropped his head, as if he'd suddenly realized its weight, nodding subtly.

Nikki frowned, but not deeply. She continued tracing her palm over Kai's back, muscles taunt. "What's her name?"

Kai jerked his head up, eyes widened in a mixture of confusion and surprise. "Huh?"

Nikki dropped her hand from his back and calmly sipped her tea. "Your white-picket-fence girl." Nikki stood, held out her hand for his mug. After a confused moment, he gave it back to her.

Without another word from either of them, Nikki strode to the kitchen and rinsed the mugs in the sink. Kai listened to the sounds of water flowing, of ceramic clinking, trying to decide what to do or say next. Nikki was as unreadable as he was when she wanted to be, maybe even more so. If she were hurt or angry, he couldn't tell.

Finally, the water shut off. She crossed back to the bed, where he still sat, and straddled his lap, hands on his shoulders. Once settled, she planted a quick peck on the tip of his nose.

"I'm proud of you," she whispered, kissing his nose again. "Spend the night. One last

time?"

Kai's eyebrows dipped, staring into her eyes, trying to read them, but they refused to speak. He contemplated her invitation. Jon knew he'd left the apartment, saying he was going to visit a friend. As overbearing as his brother could be, Kai was grateful Jon hadn't pressed him for details on exactly who the "friend" was that he spent so many nights with. Other than giving him some trouble about pushing himself too hard, Jon hadn't judged. What would be one more night? One last night together?

Kai reached up, large palm cradling her face, pulling her toward him. They kissed, tentatively, almost chastely, more words expressed in their lips than they'd previously spoken. It was a kiss that said, *Goodbye. Thank you. I'm sorry. If.*

Kai opened his eyes to darkness: an intense, overwhelming, crushing, suffocating pain in the center of his chest. He gulped at air, only to meet mouthfuls of something powdery, earthy, musty. Dirt. He panicked, clawing frantically, trying to dig through the blackness, panting, choking, fear pressing tensely, urgently against him.

Light. Air. Escape. These were his only desperate thoughts as he felt his strength waning, his mind beginning to flutter and fade. He was shaking. No, the darkness itself was trembling, and he had no air left, his throat closed tight in defeat. A voice echoed in soil-filled ears, seeming murky, distant, as if he were underwater instead of underground. It vibrated through the earth, through his body, in tune with the tremor. He felt the pull of unconsciousness, strong, compelling, like a powerful wind gripping him and carrying him away.

"*Kai!*" The voice was clearer, louder, more insistent. Despite the shudders, the intense pressure in his chest, he wanted to slip into the blackness, yield to its embrace.

"Kai!"

A sharp sting of pain burst through his cheek, and his eyes snapped open. To a dimly lit, yet blurry room. His eyes struggled to focus as pain and desperation slammed into him, his body fighting for air. Awareness didn't fully come to him yet, even as a hand gripped tightly on his arm, shook him.

"Kai, don't fucking die on me. Wake up."

He forced a blink. Air felt like something solid, tangible and stubborn, resisting the movement in and out of his body. Suddenly, the figure hovering above him cleared, his mind recognizing the silhouette. Nikki. Nikki clutching him with one hand, a phone in the other. And he came back to himself, if only barely, his body battling for oxygen, breathing raspy, high-pitched, panicked.

"Pants," he managed to say, and Nikki frowned, confused, before leaping off the bed.

He struggled to focus, to try to calm the hysterical reaction of his body, attempt to push himself up. Several tries as the flutter of fabric off to one side warred against blood rattling in his ears, wheeze loud out of panting mouth. Finally sitting, leaning forward, his breathing eased, if only slightly, ribs pulling frantically, neck muscles flexing in a desperate search for air.

"Here," Nikki said, shoving an object into his hand.

He had to concentrate, focus on breathing, on using the inhaler. Survival left no space for thought beyond continuing to exist through sheer force and will.

"I think you stopped breathing. I couldn't wake you. I called 911." Nikki's voice was urgent but surprisingly calm.

Kai shook his head, not able to answer more than that as he focused, trying to sense the effects of the medicine. But he felt heavy, his body wanting to sink back down to the bed. He was tired. His back, neck, sides ached, and his head grew foggy again, the reflex to breathe fading. It'd be so easy to just close his eyes. . . .

Kai wavered, collapsed sideways on the bed, slipped back into darkness.

September 3, 2000

Nikki sat in one of the ER waiting room chairs, in her pajama pants, legs folded and pulled up, tank top riding up to expose part of her back, bag resting in the space between her legs. She nibbled anxiously on her right thumbnail, wishing she'd brought her Nicotrol inhaler, or even better, her cigarettes.

Her stomach churned as she switched to the other thumbnail, her right knee bobbing, trying to work out her anxiety. The paramedics had arrived only a few minutes after Kai passed out. They'd injected him with something that brought him to long enough for him to refuse the tube they'd wanted to put down his throat, supposedly to help him breathe. But he'd been only semi-lucid during the short ride to the hospital, and Nikki had been told to wait while they took him away.

So she waited.

She'd been sitting here for almost an hour, and in a few more, she was supposed to report for her shift at the diner. She switched, her left knee bobbing now while she gnawed on her right thumb. Nikki remembered Kai's mutterings in the diner a couple days before. He'd said something about rejection. About not being cured. He'd been really shook up. An attack, especially like this, wasn't supposed to have happened, Nikki realized. So since it had. . . .

Fuck. It had to be really bad.

Nikki felt her eyes misting and struggled to blink the pending tears away. She wasn't going to cry, she never cried! In fact, even with all the shit she'd been through, she couldn't remember a single time in her adult life that she'd given into the luxury of tears. She wouldn't start now. At least not until she heard how Kai was doing.

Any time she saw anyone remotely medical-looking walk by, her heart would beat a little faster, hoping the wait was over. But the minutes passed in slow succession until she had all ten fingers chewed down to bloody cuticles. Finally, a young, tired-looking doctor approached. Nikki leapt to her feet, surprised she didn't fall over from having her legs folded up for so long.

". . . Fiancée, yes," Nikki replied, when he sought to confirm her identity, hoping the lie would get her info, maybe even the chance to see Kai.

"We have him on some medicine and a machine to help him breathe, to give his muscles a break." The doctor paused.

Nikki hesitated for a moment, so many questions swirling through her head, all battling to be voiced. "I thought he didn't want a machine—"

The doctor cleared his throat, smiled a faint, mildly condescending smile. "He refused invasive airway support," he began to explain, then seemed to realize that might be too technical. "He's on something called a BiPAP. A mask sits over his face, and, through alternate pressures, helps pull and push air in and out. So he doesn't have to work to breathe, and can rest."

Nikki nibbled her lip. "So does this mean he's OK?" That was the first question she should have asked, she knew, but it had somehow struggled to formulate. But if he wasn't OK, the doc would have approached things differently, right?

The doctor shifted his weight. "The good news is the preliminary tests don't indicate infection or rejection . . ."

"But?" Nikki tucked her hands under her arms to resist chewing on her fingers again.

He prefaced his response with a sigh. "We're not entirely sure why he had the attack in the first place, and though we'd like to admit him for observation and further tests, he's declining further treatment."

Nikki couldn't help smiling. If Kai was well enough to be stubborn, things couldn't be too bad. "Can I see him?"

The doctor nodded, then gestured for her to follow him as he led her toward the back exam rooms of the ER. He turned his head a few times, whether to check she was behind him or say something, she wasn't sure. If he had intended to speak, he changed his mind each time.

They wove past other doctors, nurses, curtains, until he finally stopped in front of one. She could hear a subtle whoosh of air coming from the other side of the curtain, but otherwise, the noises that echoed around her were distant. Feet shuffling, low voices, subtle clatter.

"He's not going to be able to speak while on the machine," the doctor explained in a low voice. "But perhaps you can convince him to let us admit him. It's important we get to the bottom of this."

Nikki nodded, sucked in a breath, and walked through the curtain when the doctor parted it for her.

The space was small, barely large enough for the bed, machines, and a single chair. Nikki immediately noticed Kai's face, almost entirely obscured by the mask. The tubing lead to a machine off to one side, filled with rows of information Nikki wouldn't have understood even if she'd been closer. His chest rose and fell in a regular, even rhythm. Another monitor displayed his heart rate and still more info, the wires poking out from the top of the hospital gown. An IV line was taped to the inside of his left elbow, snaking up and away. As she approached, she could see his eyes were closed, the only part of his face that wasn't obscured by the mask. It completely covered his mouth and nose, then had another piece that rested on his forehead. The whole thing held in place by multiple thin black Velcro straps. It looked uncomfortable, but if it helped him. .

..

Nikki pulled the seat closer and sank into it, reaching for his hand. She was surprised when she felt him squeeze it, and when she looked up, she saw his eyes had fluttered open. He blinked a few times, then settled his gaze on her. The normally subtle hint of green in his irises was strong, making his eyes appear like the Caribbean sea on an overcast day, the usual brilliant blue obscured by shadows. They were tired and heavy, although she wasn't able to read them completely.

She squeezed his hand hard. "Don't you ever fucking do that to me again, you hear me?"

He blinked quickly a few times, then widened his eyes. They said, *I'm sorry.*

Nikki sighed, reached up to smooth the top of his head. "I'm just glad you're OK. I was worried."

Kai pulled his hand from Nikki's, brought it to his chin, just below the edge of the mask, then extended it, back handed, out. He moved it up to his forehead, and Nikki recognized the . . . what had he called it? Name sign meaning "Nikki." Then, dropping his hand, he formed it into a fist, thumb extended and pointing up. He jerked it slightly, opening his hand and sweeping it outward and down. Next, his fist moved to his chest, where he moved it in a circle over his heart.

Nikki shook her head. "I'm sorry. I don't understand."

She saw frustration flare in his eyes, and a thought occurred to her. She reached into her bag and pulled out her phone, shifted it to text messaging, and handed it to him.

Nikki watched as he awkwardly typed out a message before showing it to her.

Thk u. 4 evrythng. Sorry. Didnt wnt 2 drg u in2 this.

Nikki stared at the message, reading it over several times before frowning. "I only play an asshole on TV," Nikki said with a wry smile. "You don't need to thank me. I'm just glad I convinced you to stay the night and that you're OK. You are OK, right? The doctor said he wanted to admit you but you wouldn't let him."

He looked at her for a moment, his eyes full of emotion, yet as indecipherable as his sign language. She was quickly learning the worst thing about the mask wasn't that it prohibited him from talking, but it hid and prevented his facial expressions. Finally, he took the phone from her again and spent a couple minutes typing a new message.

Dont wry. Knw wht im doing. Ill b fine. Jst nd rst.

She read, shaking her head even though she understood. "Then I'll call in and pick up a later shift. You can rest at my place for awhile, unless you want me to take you straight to your apartment." She paused for a moment. "But I get a feeling you don't want your brother to know about all this just yet."

Kai closed his eyes and kept them shut for a moment. Nikki watched the gentle, even rise and fall of his chest. Finally, he opened his eyes again and shook his head just enough for her to pick up on the *No*.

Nikki stood, taking her phone, and kissed him at the top of his forehead, just beneath where his hair began, the only place she could find enough exposed skin. "Let me call in real quick, and I'll be back. Try to sleep." She frowned at herself, but quickly pushed it into a smile for his sake, giving his hand a squeeze before dashing out.

Kai let his eyes fall closed as soon as Nikki disappeared through the curtain. He felt like an asshole. Signed or typed, even spoken—once he was off the machine—*Sorry* seemed such a hollow word. He'd used Nikki in more ways than one, and she'd probably saved his life. Now she was willing to miss work, collude with him in keeping this fiasco from Jon, and all after he'd basically broken up with her. Not that they'd ever really been *together*, but it had become obvious over the past few weeks that they'd somehow crossed over from being merely fuck-buddies who consoled each other with sex to something else. Some fuzzy gray area that terrified them both. Yet even before this attack, Nikki had been the only one with whom he'd shared his fears about his dyspneic episodes. They kept themselves back, yet still found some shred of communion. She hadn't even tried to convince him to let them admit him, or question why he wanted to keep things from his brother.

Kai felt himself drifting. The theophylline IV had nearly run its course, and the BiPAP made breathing effortless. Even the achy soreness in his body seemed to have faded into a dull numbness. He'd have to tell Nikki he was fine enough to drive himself home, once he got back to his car, still parked outside her apartment. No need for her to get any more involved in this than she had already. And maybe, if he were lucky, he could sneak into the apartment without encountering his brother. He could avoid dealing with this, whatever *this* was, for at least a day. Maybe.

Exhaustion pulled him toward sleep, despite his mind's efforts to stay awake, thinking, planning. He was drained, that tiredness that seemed to emanate from his bones, weighing him down, which he only felt after a major attack. And permeating its fringes was fear. If it wasn't rejection or infection, it could only be one thing. None of the doctors had said it, of course, but he knew. The transplant hadn't cured him; it'd only bought him time. And the clock was ticking. Again.

Assured by one of the ER nurses that even without admission they wouldn't kick Kai out for several hours, Nikki decided to catch a cab home. She could change, grab some clothes for Kai, and call the diner to see about changing shifts.

The apartment looked just as she'd left it. Kai's stuff on the floor on one side of the bed, the sheets pushed aside, the lights still on. Nikki dumped her bag on the mattress, then hurriedly pulled off her tank top and PJ bottoms, tossed them on the bed. A shower was tempting, but she decided against it, pulling her phone out of her purse and dialing while she fished out some clean clothes from her closet.

"Jonesville Diner. Marge."

"It's Nikki," she said simply, hopping into a pair of comfortable, faded pink cotton pants with cracked white lettering on the butt that said Jonesville U. Nikki enjoyed shopping the clearance bin at the campus bookstore; at the ends of semesters, especially, you could grab some clothes cheap if you didn't care what color they were. It didn't bother her that she'd never gone to college, that she'd never wanted to. She was happy at the diner. It wasn't the easiest job, and

especially with the night shift, you had to deal with the drunks and the occasional trucker, but it was a hell of a lot better than some of the other dives she'd worked in the past.

"If you're calling to tell me you're coming in early, you're a peach."

Nikki sighed, tied the waist on her pants, and searched, one-handed, for a bra and shirt. "Actually, I was hoping you could find someone to cover for me." Crocking the phone between her head and shoulder, Nikki strapped on the first bra she found: a pink, leopard-print push-up with black trim. "I'll do anything. I'll cover the graveyard for a month. Please, Marge."

Nikki heard background noises: the clatter of plates, the chopping of vegetables. It was likely Marge was already helping Clyde prep for the busy morning ahead, phone pressed to one ear mimicking Nikki's own position, while her hands busied doing chores around the kitchen. Marge didn't own the diner, but she practically managed it herself, and Nikki knew if Marge ever decided to retire, it'd probably fall apart.

"You had off yesterday. Hangovers ain't an excuse."

Nikki adjusted her bra, then held the phone to her ear, taking a quick sniff of each pit before deciding to dash into the bathroom for some body spray. "So if I don't show, you'll fire me?" A few spritzes and the air bloomed with pineapple and mango and strawberry.

Marge sighed heavily over the phone. "You're our best waitress. But this is Sunday morning before Labor Day. You can't do this to me."

Nikki splashed some water on her face, then jogged back out to slip into the zippered hoodie that matched her pants. "What if I had a good reason for bowing out?" Nikki sighed, debating about how much to tell Marge, as she stuffed Kai's clothes into his bag. "Don't freak out, OK?"

"OK," Marge said, her tone shifted, drawing out the word, tension evident in her voice.

"What's going on, Nikki?" Marge asked. Nikki zipped up Kai's bag and searched the front pocket for his car keys. "You in some kinda trouble?"

Nikki sighed, grabbing Kai's keys and slinging his bag over her shoulder, making sure to grab her own and cross it over her chest so it'd be secure, hands free. "Not me. . . . Kai" Nikki said vaguely, gathering his crutches in one hand and heading toward the front door.

"This have anything to do with him coming into the diner yesterday in a wheelchair? Or all the pie the day before?"

Nikki pulled the door open and laid Kai's crutches against the outside wall so she could avoid dropping them or the phone as she squeezed out the apartment, making sure the door locked behind her. "No. . . . It's. . . . Kai's . . . in the hospital right now. He's going to be OK, but he doesn't have anyone to be with him."

Nikki carefully leaned his crutches against the car, relieved to see his wheelchair, disassembled, in the back seat.

After a long silence, Marge finally said, "You ain't the new Becca, are you?"

Nikki unlocked the car, opened the back passenger's side door, and tossed his crutches in. "Fuck, Marge. I'm being a friend." She dumped each of their bags on the seat, slamming the door to ease some of her frustration. "If you're going to fire me, fine. I'll find a job somewhere else."

"Nikki, I don't proclaim to know everything, but when you're in this business as long as I've been, you come to read people. That boy needs. He's tried to fill it with pie. And with you. But if someone's jonesing for a hamburger, and all you got is grilled cheese. . . . Yeah, you might satisfy their hunger, but will they really be full?"

By the time Nikki got back to Kai, the mask had been removed, replaced by tubes feeding oxygen into his nose. His face was still slightly marked from the mask and supports, red impressions in his skin. Based on this evidence, she surmised he hadn't been off the machine long. The IV was also gone, a bandage wrapped around his elbow. He was asleep, face pale where it wasn't marked, the movement of his chest almost imperceptible.

Nikki sank into the chair, wishing she'd managed to imbibe some coffee at some point, feeling the lack of sleep beginning to catch up with her. Sighing, she picked up Kai's hand, smoothing her fingers over his. Even like this, he was beautiful in his sleep. A part of her wanted to climb into bed beside him, wrap her arms around him, and fall asleep with their bodies pressed together. She'd kept him at a distance, hadn't fought him last night when he'd stuttered out what she knew was inevitable, that he'd found someone, what he needed. Had she been wrong? Should she have tried to be more for him than a good fuck? She frowned bitterly at herself. She was going to miss him. Fuck, she already did.

Nikki woke, groggy, confused, and stiff, not certain how long she'd been out. Kai was still asleep, the marks on his face fading, but present enough to indicate it couldn't have been long. She stood up, stretched, looked down at him. His hair was a mess of golden tangles, and she couldn't resist sweeping some of it to the side, enjoying its softness. Fine, but not thin, straight, but with a subtle wave to it. She laid her hand gently on his head, her thumb stroking over the remains of the impression on his forehead, as if she could smooth it away.

His eyes opened, a small smile lifting his cheeks as they met each others' gaze. She could see, despite the attempt at a smile, the warmth in his eyes—bluer now—how exhausted he was.

"I thought you had work," he said, his voice gravely, as if it'd been a long time since he'd used it. Still, it was nice to hear it again.

"I called in. Went home to change, get you some clothes, the car. Hope that's OK." She could see keeping his eyes open was a battle.

"Why are you doing this?" His eyes were round with innocent pleading, a quiet sort of desperation, like a very young child, lost, searching for a familiar face in the crowd.

She looked away, not certain she could answer him. She'd snapped at Marge for the Becca reference, and she definitely didn't want to compare herself to the woman who had used Kai, but. . . . Nikki did know she wanted to be there for him now. He obviously wanted to handle this without his brother, and the girl—whose name he'd never given—obviously wasn't involved enough for him to bring her into this. Unless . . . he wanted to deal with this himself, alone. Forcing herself to meet his eyes again, she knew that wasn't true. The look of relief on his face when he'd woken to find her here, not gone to work, spoke volumes.

"Because I can," she said finally, planting a kiss on the tip of his nose. She didn't resist the urge to smooth his hair and forehead again, watching his eyes drift closed, enjoying the contact. "Other than tired, you feeling better? Still sure you want to go home?"

Kai inhaled deeply through his nose, let his eyes flicker open to take her in, the sweet, faint smile returning. "Yes to both." He reached up and found her hand, holding it to the side of his face. If he'd intended any further explanation, he didn't follow through. Instead, they enjoyed the silence of each others' company, sharing their touch.

The curtain parted, and a throat cleared, dragging their attention to the same worn doctor Nikki had spoken with earlier. Without much of a word, the doctor strode to the monitor, checked some numbers, then picked up one of Kai's hands. He seemed to be studying Kai's fingers carefully. Kai watched him impassively, also saying nothing.

After a minute, the doc dropped Kai's hand and frowned. "I don't suppose you've changed your mind?"

Kai shook his head.

The doctor inhaled, nodded. "I'm still not happy with your O2 sats. And we should run some more tests." He looked to Nikki, as if for help. She simply smiled and shook her head. Letting out a sigh, he said, "Then make sure you sign the treatment refusal forms. And call your doctor. You should see him ASAP. Get plenty of rest, no strenuous activity for at least a couple days. Make sure you check your peak flow, minimum twice a day."

Kai took another deep breath through his nose and nodded. "Got it. Not my first rodeo. So I'm free to go?"

The doctor frowned. "More or less," he said. He pressed a few buttons on the monitor, pulled the oximeter off of Kai's finger, and detached where the leads of his chest plugged into the wires leading to the heart monitor. Then he reached around, turning off the flow of oxygen at the source in the wall and taking the cannulae from Kai.

Kai immediately felt the loss of oxygen, Nikki could tell, though he was obviously determined not to let it show.

"All right, don't forget those forms," the doctor said. Right before he ducked out of the curtain, he added, "Don't let me see you in here again any time soon."

Kai pushed himself up, then paused, as if he were dizzy or needed to catch his breath, or the action was simply draining. Maybe a combination of all three. When he finally looked up, he smiled at her.

"God, I'm so ready to be out of here. Please tell me you brought my chair. It was in the back of my car."

She grinned, kissed his forehead. "Even better. I brought your car. Lets get you in some clothes and get you home."

Nikki set his bag on the bed, beginning to pull out his jeans and underwear and shirt. She felt his hand on her arm and looked up.

"Actually . . . if the offer's still open . . ."

She smiled. Pulled some fingers through his disheveled hair. "I'm always open to you." Then she burst out into a laugh, and he did, too, and they pressed their foreheads together, still chuckling softly.

"Thank you," Kai whispered, the hint of his laughter still carrying on his voice.

Nikki didn't have to ask him what he was grateful for.

Kai had managed to phone his brother to tell him he wouldn't be home for a few more hours. Then, he'd taken his morning meds and stripped down to his boxers before finally collapsing in Nikki's bed and giving into his exhaustion.

A few hours later, he woke to the smell of fried butter. His breathing had eased, the weariness had subsided so that he simply felt tired instead of weighed down, and a quick glance at his fingernails—the beds pink instead of blue or white—suggested his sats were better. He rubbed his hand through the disaster of his hair and pushed his way to the edge of the bed. He pulled his T-shirt on and grabbed his crutches, grateful his legs had loosened over the past few hours as he heaved himself up to his feet.

His right leg seemed to be behaving itself, so he used it and the crutches in concert to swing-through the short distance to the kitchen. Leaning against a counter, he watched Nikki flipping sandwiches in a pan.

"Hey," she said, looking over her shoulder at him with a gentle smile. "Figured you had to be hungry. I'm no chef, but think I can manage a grilled cheese."

He slipped out of his crutches, left them propped against the cabinets, and used the counter on her left side to help pull himself closer behind her. Then he braced himself with an arm around her waist, leaning heavily on his right leg. Her back rested against his chest and stomach.

"I know 'sorry' and 'thank you' don't cut it, but . . ."

She shrugged, lifting up the edge of one of the sandwiches to check its doneness. "You know . . ." she hesitated. "You know you can always come to me. I'll always be here," she said, grimacing, grateful he couldn't see her face. She sounded so stupidly needy and pathetic. "I just meant . . ."

He shifted his weight and grip on her, then reached to the cabinet and pulled out two plates, setting them on the counter beside the stove. She couldn't help leaning into him a bit; not enough to set him off balance, just to get a little closer. How could she have thrown this away? She loved the feel of his chest pressing against her with each inhalation, and closed her eyes just

for a moment, as if she could commit this instance to memory, replay it later.

"I'm pretty sure they're done," he said softly, dipping his head toward her ear, tracing a hand along her forearm as if to wake it.

It sent a tingle through her entire body, but she snapped out of it, carefully scooping the slightly dark sandwiches onto the plates. After shutting off the stove, she turned carefully in his arm so they were facing each other, her head tilted back to meet his eyes.

"We should eat," she said, her voice a little hoarse.

"Yeah. We should," he agreed, his breathing a little more ragged, his eyes dark.

She reached up to cradle his cheek, or maybe to try to bring him closer—she wasn't sure—because suddenly his stomach gurgled loudly, a reminder that neither of them had eaten anything since the evening before.

They laughed together. "Guess that's our cue," he said, twisting and reaching back for a crutch for his left arm.

She saw him ready to grab his plate with his right hand and shrugged him off. "I got it. Go sit."

He looked at her, eyes narrowing.

She sighed. "Is your stubbornness the reason you've survived all these years?"

"Partially," he said with a sly grin.

She shoved the plate into his empty hand. "Fine. Go ahead, then. I'll get drinks."

Nikki quickly turned her back on him again, opening the fridge and staring into it for a moment, trying to cool her face, which suddenly felt uncomfortably warm. She grabbed two cans of Coke, then remembered he didn't drink caffeine, and swapped one for a bottled water. Another thing she realized she did just for him; she'd always been perfectly happy with tap. She let her forehead come to rest on the freezer door, the fridge still open.

"Nikki? You OK?"

His concerned voice snapped her out of her numbness and she shut the door, snagging her plate and planting a smile on her face. "You're not dead; the sandwiches aren't completely burnt. Life is good."

Kai laughed quietly.

Her smile faded quickly as soon as she took her seat across from him. She looked up, wanting to say something, but unable to find the words.

"I've been an asshole," he said, his face contrite, picking up his sandwich as if he intended to take a bite. Instead, he simply held it, almost as if he'd forgotten what to do with it.

"No. This was never supposed to have been more than fucking. The fact that it . . . became whatever it became is more my fault than yours." She picked off the crust bit by bit. It gave her something to focus on. "I let myself. . . . Anyway, it doesn't matter. I hope you'll still drop by the diner. Or call me. If there's no one else. . . . And you need somebody. . . ."

"*Perfectly fucked up*," he said, sim-comming, speaking while he signed. "We really are a matched set."

"More like odds 'n ends picked up at a flea market." She tossed down a bit of bread toward the pile of crust chunks she'd formed while they spoke, then forced herself to look up at him. "Be happy with her, OK?"

Jon was lounging in the couch, laptop open in his lap, the TV tuned to football, although he wasn't really watching it, the volume turned nearly all the way down. He heard the door click open, and a few minutes later, the subtle squeak of Kai's chair. He pushed his computer aside and stood. Kai looked paler than normal and tired, his face drawn.

"I'm assuming by the fact that you're not yelling at me means you got my message."

Jon nodded, crossed his arms over his chest. "What's going on, Kai? Yesterday, with the two workouts, being late for lunch. Being gone over half today when you knew I wasn't working so we could spend some time together. Showing up and looking like you haven't slept in days.

Don't tell me you're fine. Talk to me.”

Kai stared into Jon's eyes for a long while, looking broken and defeated. “I can't, Jon.”

“Can't? Or won't?” Jon pulled his fingers through his hair and sunk back down into the sofa. He crossed his ankles and stared at the TV.

Kai sighed, pushed closer to the couch, and transferred so he was sitting next to his brother. “I'm sorry, Jon.”

Jon shrugged, let his head fall back. “Whatever you're up to is none of my business. I get it. You don't need my help. Or want it.”

“Jon . . .” Kai pulled a leg up and turned so he was facing his brother more.

Jon didn't move.

“Look,” Kai said, touching Jon's arm with just his fingertips, “I know your ASL isn't great, but . . . it'd be easier for me if I could sign instead of talk about this.”

Surprised, Jon eased up, and mimicked his brother's position, strange mirrors of each other. “I'll do my best.”

Kai cradled the back of his neck for a moment, just breathing. Finally, he brought his hands to chest level and began signing hesitantly. “*Lately I've been . . . confused.*” Kai's facial expressions were enough to help convey his meaning.

“Confused?”

Kai nodded.

Jon's eyes grew wide, his brows knitting, mouth dropping open. He looked like a caricature. “You mean, like you think you might be . . . gay?”

Kai started to laugh, the laughter escalating. Every time he tried to stop, he'd look up at Jon, who appeared even more perplexed and horrified than he had before, and Kai'd laugh harder, bent over, struggling for breath. After several minutes, Kai sat back, getting himself under control again. Forgetting himself for a moment, he began to sign rapidly.

Jon held up his hands. “Woah, woah. Slow down. Now I'm the one confused.”

Kai took a large breath. “*Sorry. That look on your face. . . . I hope I never forget that look.*”

Jon gripped his hair but said nothing.

“*I'm not gay.*”

“I take it that means ‘gay,’” Jon said, mimicking his brother's sign, thumb and index finger held opposite each other, then tapped on the chin.

Kai nodded. “You find some free time, I'd appreciate it if you took a refresher. It's important to me.”

“*I'm sorry,*” Jon signed, one he remembered.

Kai shrugged. He seemed to have lost his resolution to confess whatever it was he wanted to say.

“*Please say me,*” Jon tried to sign, making his face as earnest as he could. “*I'm sorry.*”

Kai rolled his eyes, sighed, and sim-commed, demonstrating what he knew Jon had meant to say, “*Tell me,*” index finger from lips down to chest. “*Refresher.*”

Jon reddened. “*Sorry. Easier for me to understand you than . . .*”

“I get it.” Kai leaned back against the couch arm, rubbed his eyes, stretched. “*There's this girl I've been fucking,*” Kai said, watching his brother's face for a reaction. “*Girl. Fuck. Me.*” Kai repeated, demonstrating the signs and speaking them, knowing his brother hadn't got it. “*That's where I go.*”

Jon nodded. “I suspected as much.”

“*That's all it's ever been. Just sex, really. . . . Mutual agreement.*” Kai glanced over at the TV; the Colts were kicking a field goal. He sighed, turned back to his brother. “*But there's this other girl, from school. I'm pretty sure she likes me, and I like her. . . .*” Kai paused to see if Jon had gotten it.

“*Girl. School. Like. You like a girl from school, she likes you. So you weren't sure how to*

handle things with . . . this other girl. The one you're sleeping with."

Kai struggled not to laugh again at Jon. "Yes. *Last night, I went to the girl thinking I'd call it off, but . . .*" Kai paused, fingers in the end of the sign for "but," index fingers of each hand spaced apart and pointing up.

"*But you're confused,*" Jon signed, smiling, knowing he had to have gotten it right since Kai had used both signs.

Kai chuckled before his face grew serious. "Yeah. *I don't know. Some things happened, and I'm wondering if maybe there is something between us? I don't know what to do,*" Kai finished, sim-comming, frowning, eyebrows dipped sternly.

Jon carded his fingers through his hair several times, thinking. "I appreciate your talking to me. But considering the mess that is my love life, not sure if I'm the one who should be giving relationship advice."

"Advise me anyway. Otherwise, how can I be stubborn and ignore it? Isn't that what little brothers are supposed to do?"

Jon laughed. "Go with your gut. . . . Heart. . . . Brain?"

Kai chuckled. "Guess that's what I get for asking a doctor for advice."

Jon shrugged, mussed his hair. "Not going out every night might make a big difference with dealing with your course load, though."

Kai rolled his eyes. "This coming from the guy who finished high school two years early, did college and med school in six, and is double-board certified in both adult and peds pulm. And you're what . . . thirty?"

Jon sighed, covered his face with his hands, muttered to himself, "When you have nothing, you need to find something."

Kai heard him though, and nodded. When Jon moved his hands, he saw Kai was flicking the rubber band against his wrist hard, over and over.

Jon pointed. "You want to talk about that?"

Kai seemed to snap out of a trance, growing pale and covering his wrist with his other hand. "It's nothing."

Jon studied his brother, brows deeply furrowed. "Are girls the only thing bothering you?"

Kai returned his brother's gaze, face stoic, then pulled himself into his chair. "Thanks for the advice. I think I'm going to lie down, try to study. Let's grab dinner together somewhere later?"

Kai didn't give Jon the opportunity to respond to that non-answer. Concern and worry lined Jon's face as he found his fingers slipping below his shirt, under the waistband of his pants and briefs, right along the edge of the psoas muscle of his right hip. The scars had faded long ago, but Jon remembered them. Remembered making them, and hoped his concerns about Kai were unfounded.

September 4, 2000

The sandwich shop was nearly empty when Renee stepped through the doors. She was a little late, having spent nearly an hour agonizing over what to wear. Finally, she'd settled on a pair of denim capris that hugged her body, along with a cute short-sleeved, polka-dotted red blouse. It dipped just enough in front to be sexy without making Renee feel uncomfortable. She'd even worn the expensive push-up bra Diane had insisted she buy, since it made her modest breasts appear fuller and rounder.

Her heart pounded in her throat as she strode through the restaurant, looking for Kai. The front room held the counter and a scattering of chairs and tables, between which a tile pathway led to a back room. This space was larger than she'd expected, filled with more tables, some of them large and long with benches to accommodate large groups. Although it was quiet, Renee could imagine the place bustling with the lunch crowd, a combination of students, businessmen, and housewives all hunched over their sandwiches, the din of dozens of conversations echoing off the walls.

Kai sat at the end of one of the large wooden tables, facing her, his head bent over an open book. One hand idly tapped out a loose rhythm against the table with a highlighter. She could have stood there for hours, just watching him in silence, but she longed to see his face, hear his voice.

"Hey. Sorry I'm late."

He looked up, smiled faintly at her. His face seemed tired, worn-out, stressed, as if it were the week before finals instead of the start of the semester. "S OK," he said, as if it were one word. Then he seemed to finally take her in, and his smile broadened, although the weariness in his eyes hadn't cleared. "You look nice."

She smiled, unable to hide a blush, dumping her backpack on the floor. "Thanks," she said, sitting down on the bench across the table from him.

He stretched to snag a menu from the middle of the table and handed it to her. "You hungry? Take a look and decide what you want."

She nodded and pretended to study it, although she already knew she had to try the famous chicken salad. Instead, she took the opportunity to glance up at him every so often. A part of her hoped she'd catch him doing the same; it could have simply been silly romantic longing, but she swore she felt the heat of those blue eyes on her when she wasn't looking.

"Know what you want?" He'd folded his arms on his textbook, and was leaned forward, as if studying her now instead of history.

She nodded.

"OK. Good. My treat."

"I couldn't . . ."

"For the notes." He smiled, warm, inviting, his eyes softening.

She melted into it, stammered out a protest. "You already bought me coffee the other day."

His smile widened. "Then for meeting me. Helping me study. Consider it payment for your time."

"You don't need to buy that," she blurted, immediately flushing.

He laughed softly, shook his head. "Fair enough. I'm still buying."

Kai turned in his seat, using his hands to help arrange his feet. Then he pushed against the sturdy wood table to help get himself to his feet, reaching down to his left knee before standing fully upright. His feet seemed perfectly straight, almost unnaturally parallel to each other. She couldn't help staring. He was so tall, and even though he was dressed in his usual—dark, loose-fitting carpenter jeans and a polo, buttoned all the way in one size too big for him—

she could see the muscles in his arms, the definition in his shoulders he couldn't completely mask.

Kai was certainly a mystery. He clearly had a beautiful body, one that came from hard work. Most guys she'd known who worked out regularly did it partially—if not largely—for the satisfaction of showing off the fruits of their labor. But Kai seemed more interested in hiding. It simultaneously perplexed and intrigued her.

She watched as he steadied himself, leaning more on his right, and extended a hand to help her up. Either he misjudged her weight, or he was stronger than she expected, because she was pulled to her feet, suddenly finding herself pressed against him. Unless it had been on purpose. *Oh, God.* He smelled subtly *clean*: the almost imperceptible odor of chlorine, soap, deodorant. A blank canvas of indistinct scents. She tilted her head to look up at him, her hand pressing against the flat plane of his stomach as if by reflex. She could feel the firm muscles beneath the fabric of his shirt, and it took a moment for her brain to switch on and enable her to take a step back.

Renee had to clear her throat to find her voice. "Thanks. . . . Sorry." Her face grew hot, and she could barely follow the motion of his hand, indicating for her to go, and he would follow.

As soon as Renee strode up the slight ramp in the doorway connecting the rear of the restaurant to the front, she turned to wait for him, watching him lumber along. It was subtle, something easy to overlook, but she saw how he pushed off with his right foot, partially using his good leg and his trunk to help ease his stiff left leg forward. Although he walked casually enough, each step clearly took effort. When he reached the doorway, he instinctively reached out with both hands to grab the frame on each side, pulling himself up into the room. She realized he must wear some kind of brace on that leg beneath his jeans. What had happened, she wondered. An accident? Some kind of injury? A broken leg that hadn't healed properly?

He smiled at her once he drew closer. It wasn't self-conscious, just a bit reserved. "You can see running isn't one of my hobbies."

They walked side by side now. She was afraid to laugh, even to smile. In fact, it took her a moment for her brain to process anything other than what he might look like under those clothes. Was he scarred, and that's why he dressed as he did?

"Can I ask, what . . . what happened to your leg?"

He sighed through his teeth. "It's complicated. I'll tell you, but not now, OK? Let's order lunch?"

She wanted to apologize; instead she only nodded, following him the last couple feet to the counter. Ugh. She shouldn't have said anything. Should have let him tell her when he was ready. He was more forthcoming when he volunteered the information freely instead of when she asked directly.

"Hey, Kai. Who's your friend?"

Kai was leaning on the top of the deli case, talking to a middle-aged woman behind the counter. She was tall, broad shouldered, with brown hair cropped close to her head. Her face was stern, yet friendly.

Kai glanced over at Renee. "Nancy, this is Renee. Renee, Nancy. She owns the place." Renee waved and managed a polite smile, but Nancy's attention was on Kai, almost as if Renee weren't there.

"How you been doing? You look good. Seem to be walking, well, too. You know Nate and I prayed for you every day."

Kai's eyes darted toward Renee for a split second before returning to Nancy. "Hope I didn't ruin your chances for getting your prayers for winning the lottery answered." Nancy hesitated a moment, then grinned. She waved a hand at him. "You always did have more of a sense of humor than your brother. How is he, anyway?"

"Same. Working too much."

Nancy clicked her tongue and turned her attention to the register. "The usual?" Kai nodded.

Nancy entered his order into the register. "How you two know each other?"

"School." Renee was a little relieved to see Kai's sparsity of responses wasn't anything personal on her behalf.

"We have several classes together," Renee added, trying to join the conversation.

"And how is that going for you? You don't think it's too soon?" Nancy seemed to be ignoring Renee, and had momentarily turned from the register to pour hot water into an insulated cup.

"Nancy," Kai said.

Renee was amazed how it could seem like a warning and yet neither his tone nor face seemed menacing. His smile was still there, his body still relaxed. Although she could see tension in his shoulders despite the loose fabric. Everything Nancy had said so far seemed to give credence to Renee's accident hypothesis. Then she remembered Art saying something about Kai's parents. And Kai saying it was just him and his brother, then immediately freezing up. Had his parents been killed in the accident, and Kai hurt? If so, it couldn't have been too long ago if Nancy was thinking it was "too soon" for school. Or she could be totally wrong.

Renee jumped when she felt Kai's hand lightly touch her shoulder.

He frowned remorsefully, as if he were deeply sorry to have startled her. It was odd, yet made a warmth bubble up inside her anyway.

"What do you want to order?" He was looking at her, eyes brilliant, unreadable blue.

"Oh. Um. I thought I'd try the chicken salad sandwich. And a coffee, plenty of milk."

Renee found herself unable to look away from Kai's gaze. She didn't even want to blink. What was it about him? It was more than his height or hair or eyes or anything superficial like that. It was like he was a code, waiting to be solved, and she wanted desperately to be the one to decipher him. To be the one he let down his walls for.

"Sure thing. Anything else?"

"Two bottled waters," Kai said. "Renee?"

She forced herself to blink. "No, I'm good," she said, smiling, then blushing. "I'm . . ." She suddenly felt a need to splash cold water on her face. "Where's the restroom?"

Nancy pointed toward the back and totaled their order. "Let's call it \$20 even," she said. Kai had already pulled his wallet out. "Nance . . ."

"It's my restaurant, and if I say it's twenty—even—that's what it is."

Kai sighed and handed her a single bill. "Go ahead," he said to Renee, who was rooted in place. "I'll get the drinks, and Nancy'll bring us the rest." He smiled at her, soft and warm, the expression only just piercing the fortress of his eyes.

It made her smile back, and so she forced herself to leave him, heading toward the back of the restaurant.

Jon strode out of the hall leading to the exam rooms, stethoscope dangling around his neck, patient folder under one arm. He headed for the front desk, where Vicky Gregory, the pulmonary section's outpatient clinic office manager, was sitting, reading a novel.

A nurse by training, it hadn't been long until Vicky had discovered she vastly preferred administration to nursing. Vicky had been making sure the clinic ran smoothly since before Jon had arrived back in Jonesville for the beginning of his dual fellowship program. And was also one of the few who put up with Jon's obsessive neuroticism, serving as receptionist and as-needed nurse for him on days like today, when everyone else in the clinic took off. Vicky was tall, with a narrow frame and waist-length, straight brown hair she rarely styled, letting its thickness rest against her back.

"Hey, Vic, order me another oximeter. Bill it to me personally."

Vicky made a note on a post-it. "First thing tomorrow. Let me guess: you gave yours away. Again."

Jon handed her the file and leaned on the top of the counter. "Single working mother. Couldn't afford one. And tracking oxygen saturation is important. I'm trying to see if I can get a study running to determine if sats are more accurate predictors of exacerbations in FS than peak flow."

"God, I love it when you talk doctor to me," Vicky said in a teasingly mocking tone. Jon rolled his eyes, but grinned. Then he sighed and massaged the bridge of his nose. "How much time do I have before my next patient?" He checked his watch. 12:44.

"You need to check your sugar?"

Jon nodded, pulled his stethoscope off and folded it, stuffing it into one of his bottom pockets. "Probably eat, too. And get some coffee."

"You know, you might actually sleep if you drank less caffeine."

Jon shrugged. "Still wouldn't sleep. At least it keeps me alert. Tell me I have at least 15 minutes."

"Even better. Thirty. Which means you have enough time for an actual meal." She raised an eyebrow at him.

"You sound like my brother," Jon sighed.

"How is he, by the way?" Vicky asked, snagging her purse from under the desk and standing.

Jon sighed and pulled a hand through his hair. "Living out the teenage rebellion he didn't get to experience before."

Vicky pulled her purse onto a shoulder and walked around Jon, through the waiting room. He followed. "Drugs, sex, rock 'n' roll?"

Jon laughed wearily. "Something like that." They walked together out of the clinic, down the hall toward the elevators. "You know what he said to me the other day? That he didn't need a father."

Vicky laughed as she leaned forward and pressed the elevator call button. "I've only known you four years, but you are a bit '30, going on 60,' so not sure I can blame him." She bumped her hip against him playfully and flashed him a grin. "Come on. Let me buy you lunch."

Waiting for Renee, Kai sipped his tea and frowned. He hadn't felt motivated to add his usual honey, settling for a few packets of raw sugar instead. So it didn't taste the same: bitter, rather than sweet.

He knew he'd been lucky that Jon wasn't on-call this weekend. Because if he had been, the fellow who treated him in the ER would have spoken to Jon, wanting advice on the unusual and bewildering case. Even without his name, just from the quick presentation of the patient, Jon would have known it was Kai. 22-year-old white male, double-lung transplant, FS. *That's my brother*. As it was, Kai knew he wouldn't be able to hide it long. Especially if it wasn't an isolated incident. Kai shook his head, holding back a bitter laugh. So much for not hiding anymore.

Jon had left early, before Kai's alarm had roused him from a heavy sleep at seven so he could take his morning meds. After that, Kai had crawled back into bed, sleeping until his alarm woke him again a few hours later, his stomach achy and nauseous from taking the drugs without eating. Kai was better, but he hadn't felt like this in months. And he was desperately trying not to worry. Both about what the attack could mean, and that he'd have another one. Because if stress had played a factor, worrying wasn't going to help.

And if the faint pain below his sternum—which he hoped eating would solve—wasn't enough, there was Renee. Whom it was getting harder to keep the truth from. And he didn't want to snap at her. But today, of all days, he just wanted to be with her. To just enjoy her company, a guy and a girl who liked each other, studying history.

Ugh. History.

He still wasn't sure what to do about Nikki. She could have let the ambulance go; she didn't need to ride along. She hadn't needed to stay, waiting hours in the waiting room. She hadn't needed to take off work for him, or bring him his clothes and chair, or bring him back to her bed because he didn't want to go home and risk facing his brother. But she had. She had even made him lunch. Even though she hadn't pleaded with him, it felt wrong somehow to just sever things completely. But what about Renee? Was he being fair to her if he kept seeing Nikki?

"You OK?" Renee took her seat across from him, frowning, eyes wide and soft with concern.

Kai wiped a hand over his face, as if he could use it to clear the pained expression that had worried Renee. "Yeah, fine. Just worrying about how I'm going to remember all this stuff." She smiled sweetly. "It's all right. I'll help you. We can start with history, if you like. We'll figure out what works for you."

He cradled the back of his neck and smiled genuinely. "Thanks, Re," he said, clipping her name so it sounded like "ray."

She beamed. "I like it when you call me that."

He frowned, uncertain what she meant. "Huh? Did I mention my short-term memory isn't so great?"

"You called me 'Re.'"

"Oh, I . . ." He flushed. She realized he was cute when he did.

"I told you; I like it." She pulled out her book and notes. "How much have you gotten a chance to read?"

He leaned back, looking sheepish. "Not much."

"That's OK," she said with a sweet smile. "We can focus on the review questions, and it'll give us something to concentrate on." Renee tapped her fingers on a line of text. "What are the characteristics of a civilization?"

Kai stared at his open textbook, as if expecting it to speak the answer. Finally, he sighed and shook his head.

"That's OK. Why don't you see if you can find the answer? Either in the book or the copy of my notes I gave you?"

Kai pulled the crumpled papers from the back of the book, smoothed them out with his hands. "You probably think I'm a slacker," he mumbled. "Or an idiot."

Renee frowned, leaned forward to lay her hand on his. His skin was rough, maybe dry from the chlorine she'd smelled earlier. "No. Of course not." She hesitated. "You've just been through a lot."

His face paled for a moment, eyes wide, before he forced himself to neutrality. "You've been talking to Art."

Renee took her hand back and pulled a few wide-spaced fingers carefully through her curls. "Are you mad?"

He sighed, then looked at her. His expression was completely unreadable. "I figured you would ask him about me." Kai smiled, but it was tight, pained. He sat up straighter, working his fingers into his lower back, as if it ached.

"He didn't really tell me anything. Said I had to ask you."

Kai's entire body seemed to relax. "That's Art." A weak smile appeared on his face.

"So?"

"So?" He dropped his attention back to the notes.

"You're not going to enlighten me?" She tried to make her voice light, teasing, flirtatious. He didn't look up. "My life story isn't exactly first-date material."

Renee's stomach knotted brutally. Did that mean he considered this a date? Or was it simply a convenient expression? It suddenly felt hard to breathe, and she was enormously

grateful he seemed so focused on the notes. Right now, she wasn't sure if she could stand a direct gaze from those eyes, two blue bottomless pools.

Thankfully, Nancy finally appeared with their food. "Sorry it took so long," she said, seemingly to Kai. "Sorting out a mix-up with one of our big catering orders." She set the plate with a gigantic, over-stuffed sandwich in front of Renee. "Chicken salad." Then she set a plate and cup of soup off to Kai's side, since his book dominated the table in front of him. "Veggie sandwich and potato soup."

Kai looked up, pushed some hair out of his face, smiled tiredly. "Thanks, Nance."

She pulled silverware out of the pocket of her apron. They clattered on the wood as they spilled onto the table. "I'll be right back with some more tea and coffee."

Renee watched as Kai picked up a spoon, and, elbow propped on his open book, began to stir his soup. First clockwise, then he'd reverse direction, back and forth, one way, then the other, staring at the broth, but not looking terribly intent on eating it.

Renee feared she'd messed up. Again. She swallowed, tried to keep her voice lighthearted. "You struck me more as the roast beef and chili type."

He looked up at her, a single eyebrow raised, still holding his spoon lazily in one hand. Liquid dropped off the tip into the bowl. "I don't eat meat anymore."

She studied him. "Herbal tea, vegetarian. Is your deep, dark secret that you're actually a closeted hippie?"

A smile peeled across his face. He chuckled, his eyes sparkling, brightening for the first time that afternoon. "Not exactly."

Renee attempted to cut her sandwich into quarters. "My maw maw would be appalled. She doesn't think a dish, let alone a meal, is complete without meat." She stopped what she was doing and jerked her head up, looking apologetic. "Sorry. I didn't mean to offend."

He scowled deeply, set down his spoon. "I do have PETA on speed dial. . . . But I guess I can give you a pass this once." His face transformed. She'd never seen anyone with so many variations on a simple smile. From what she'd seen in the short time she'd known him, it was likely he had dozens of grins. She wanted to see them, know them all. This one was simple, sweet, and seemed to lift the weariness in his eyes, like sun burning off fog.

He spooned some soup into his mouth, did some of that sexy lip licking, tongue searching out any final drops that may have caught on his lips. "I don't drink coffee, either, but I'm not going to chew you out if you do. It's OK."

Renee relaxed, took a bite of her sandwich and couldn't stifle a moan. She wasn't sure if it was the best chicken salad in the Midwest, but it was definitely the best she'd ever had.

He laughed a little harder, and his smile sweetened. Genuine. This was Kai relaxed, enjoying himself. Whatever had happened, whatever demons loomed behind the mask he normally kept firmly in place, they were gone. Maybe only for this fleeting moment, but it was one she would enjoy as long as it lasted.

Jon placed his glucose monitor back in its case and zipped it closed. Vicky watched absently, sipping her diet Coke.

They sat across from each other in the back of the main Jonesville Memorial cafeteria. Vicky had gotten a salad; Jon had opted for a grilled chicken breast and steamed vegetables. The food wasn't gourmet, but it actually wasn't bad. Vicky concentrated on mixing up her salad.

"Kai's good influence is rubbing off on you."

He shrugged. "Sometimes I wonder: who makes the worst patient? The recently diagnosed, because they're still in denial, don't know how to handle their disease? Or the one who's lived a long time with their condition, become complacent or simply tired?"

Vicky frowned at her lettuce. Jon was prone to hypothetical musings like this one, most of which didn't necessarily demand a response.

"Can I ask you something?"

Jon shrugged, popped a broccoli in his mouth.

"Do you ever shut off?"

Jon's face shifted from serious, to annoyed, to amused. He swallowed carefully, a slight smile gracing his face. "Not really. I'm a regular Energizer Bunny." Was that a double entendre? Jon was rarely jovial, so serious and focused all the time. It was nice to see him smile.

"Listen, this friend of mine has a birthday party weekend after next. It's a costume party. Come with me. It'll be fun."

Jon nearly choked. He took a few gulps of his coffee. "You obviously don't know me."

"I do." Vicky stabbed several pieces of lettuce, then pointed her fork at him. "But that doesn't mean I don't think you shouldn't come out of your shell."

Jon frowned, carded his fingers through his hair, then shook the strands, almost as if he were trying to dry it. "Vic—"

"Just as friends. I'll even pick out your costume, so you don't have to worry about it." Jon focused on cutting his chicken. "I might be on-call that weekend. I'd have to check my schedule."

"Unless you're on shift that weekend, you can still come to the party. Just bring your pager and a cell phone."

Jon sighed heavily, smoothed a hand over his hair, making up for the mess he'd made of it earlier. "All right. Fine. But I'm not dressing up. Halloween isn't till the end of October, anyway."

Vicky chewed and swallowed before smiling. "Don't worry. I'll make sure it's something sexy. All the women will be fawning over you all night. Trust me. You'll thank me." She grinned, a mixture of triumph and cunning, sipping her drink.

"Fine," Jon said, shoulders hunched. "But I reserve the right of first refusal. I am not a silly person." His lips were drawn tight, but she saw a subtle sparkle in his gray eyes.

"All right. Serious costumes only for you. Does that mean I can go as ridiculous and embarrassing as possible for mine? Like . . . Vegas Showgirl. Or Xena Warrior Princess. Or Elvira."

Jon blushed. He actually blushed. And Vicky couldn't help laughing.

Renee had helped Kai review the key material from the first few chapters of their history text, and he was beginning to feel more confident. She had noticed his remark about short-term memory issues was more than just an off-handed joke, but she'd quickly realized if he could find a way to visualize the information, he processed and remembered more easily. It also eased his frustration, and he'd relax. She found she liked seeing Kai relaxed. They were winding down when Kai's phone rang.

"Crap," he said, staring at the display. "I guess I didn't hear it ring earlier. Is it OK if I . . . ?" He gestured with the phone, which continued to ring in his hand.

"Go ahead," she said with a nod and a smile, packing up her books and notes.

Kai grinned at her and answered the phone. "Hey. Sorry, I was studying."

Renee tried not to eavesdrop, but the voice on the other end was loud enough for her to catch most of the conversation.

"It's OK. I called whenever I had a minute to come up for air. The diner's been a madhouse today; I just wanted to make sure you were OK."

Renee concentrated on meticulously repacking her bag, as if everything needed to be done in a particular way. But she couldn't help the jealousy and disappointment that flared from hearing the concerned female voice on the other end of Kai's phone conversation. She already knew Kai didn't have any family other than his brother, so unless Kai's brother had undergone some serious hormone therapy, the voice had to belong to his girlfriend. The one she'd feared he'd had from the beginning, but which she'd desperately hoped he didn't. So much

for his date reference. Disappointed, she realized she had been right all along. She was just someone to help him pass his core classes; nothing more.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Kai was saying, smiling at Renee. She vaguely had the impression she'd zoned out for part of the conversation and was catching Kai repeating himself.

"OK, good. God, I probably sound like a clingy, psycho girlfriend," the voice said. Yep, no denying it now. Renee sighed sadly, grateful Kai was too caught up in the conversation to notice.

He frowned, looked away from Renee, lowered his voice. "I know you had to have been scared and worried. I'm sorry. I'll try to drop by the diner tomorrow."

He finished his call, tossed his phone aside, and gripped the back of his neck.

"Sorry about that. Thanks for helping me today; I really appreciate it."

He looked at her with such genuine gratitude and happiness, pure and unfiltered, a true gift from him, who kept himself masked and hidden. She could almost forget he'd just been on the phone with his girlfriend.

"Are you parked far? If it's close, I'll walk you to your car." Kai started to push himself up, but his face paled, and he seemed to change his mind. He dipped his head to hide his face, but she saw his hands gripped the wood of the table tightly, knuckles white. After a moment, he looked up, smiling, but the gates had closed, the drawbridge retracted. "Sorry. I just remembered Nancy asked me to help her with a few things as a thanks for letting us hang out here all afternoon."

Renee opened her mouth to protest, but he held up his hand to stop her.

"It's all right. If I didn't see you again the rest of the semester, I would still be grateful for today." His smile softened. "Not that I don't want to see you again."

Ugh. Talk about mixed signals. Did his girlfriend know he was blatantly flirting with another woman?"

"Uh, I guess I'll see you in class then. Thanks for lunch." She shouldered her bag. "If you ever reconsider the vegetarian thing, you should give the chicken salad a try." She winked, then flushed, embarrassed. Disappointment hung heavy from her heart. "Can I ask you something?"

He shrugged.

"Art said your name was Taylor. Why did you change it?"

Kai's warm expression evaporated, his face growing stony. He almost looked ill. It took him longer than normal to recover, shifting into the placid mask of neutrality he normally wore. "I don't talk about that," he said in a tone she couldn't determine. "My name is Fox now. Please don't ask about it again."

Renee was so surprised, she took a step back. His reaction was unlike any she'd seen from him so far. Even when she'd asked about his family or his leg, he'd been clipped and evasive at worst. This reaction was outright hostile. And whereas he'd offered to talk about his leg at some point, his name was clearly earmarked as taboo. What had happened to him that made him change his name and react so viscerally when she innocently asked about it?

He seemed to come to himself, pushing himself up after all and locking his leg, approaching her with an apologetic look. "I'm sorry, Re," he said. She wasn't sure if his use of the diminutive was intentional, to emphasize his candor. He hesitantly reached for her hand, waiting for her to yield to him before nestling it in his palm. "I know you don't know much about me. I want to give you the chance to learn, but . . ." He hesitated, staring at their fingers. It was almost impossible for her to be angry at him when his skin touched hers, even in a chaste gesture such as this.

Kai pulled away, sinking down so he perched on the edge of the table, his left leg straight, his right, slightly bent. He kept his gaze lowered as he spoke. "My parents were killed when I was six." He looked up briefly, holding up a hand to stop her, as if he knew she was going to interrupt. "It's OK; I don't really remember them." He sighed, cradled his neck, a habit she was

beginning to realize he did when he was unsure or anxious. "I grew up in a group home," he said softly.

Renee sunk down onto the table beside him. Since she was so much shorter, she rested her feet on the bench. "You weren't adopted?"

He tilted his head, hesitating, before finally shaking it. "People want babies. Not. . . ." He bit his lip. "Nobody wanted me." His words were so faint, she barely caught them.

"Oh, Kai, I had no idea." She placed a hand on his shoulder, realizing the muscles were like steel under the loose confines of his shirt.

"Told you, not first-date conversation." He attempted a faint smile, but failed. With a sigh, he pushed some hair off his face. "I don't talk about my past much. Period. With anyone. So just . . . don't take it personally."

He turned to face her, his eyes beautiful cerulean. She suddenly had an overwhelming desire to kiss him. She didn't care that he had a girlfriend. Those eyes seemed to pull her in—filled with so much emotion she couldn't begin to parse it all out. Sadness, fear, anxiety, vulnerability, hope, longing, pain. It was too soon, she knew, as she felt herself drawing closer, their lips near enough to taste each others' breath.

Their eyes closed, lips grazed, and they kissed. She honestly wasn't sure whose lips met whose first, but they pressed together, and his tongue teased, begging for entrance. She opened happily, her mind shut down, not thinking of consequence or logic, simply melting into the moment. He reached up and cradled her cheek, taking control, kissing with a hunger and a desperation that surprised her. He consumed her, tongue licking alongside hers, sucking gently on its tip, pulling her closer. Yet, at the same time, he was tender, not brutal. His kiss transported Renee onto another plane, her entire body buzzing, a lightness filling her unlike any she'd experienced before. It was almost as if, in this kiss, they were no longer their separate selves, but an entirely new entity, linked by lips and passion.

Finally, he pulled back, with difficulty, as if their lips were magnets struggling to separate. His hand still cupped her face, his eyes soft, looking transformed somehow. He breathed raggedly and heavily, and her own eyes felt misty, glazed over. She struggled to come back to herself, blinking a few times. Neither of them seemed capable of speech.

"Wow. . . . If that's how you thank me for one study session, I'd love to see what I get after I help you cram for the final." Renee laughed through her blush.

"Oh, God, Re," he said, his voice a breath, as he smoothed a curl through two fingers, brushing her cheek with the back of his thumb. His eyes had shifted yet again, unreadable, *full*, and she wished she knew what they were saying.

"I . . . should go," Renee managed to stammer.

"I'm sorry," he said, pulling away, shutting down.

She stood, stepped over his legs so she was facing him, close. She nudged his chin up with her fingers. "No. It's OK." She chuckled. "That was more than OK. But I have some things to do before my roommate gets back." She picked up one of his hands and squeezed it. "We'll talk later." Flashing a warm smile, and still buoyed by the taste of his tongue, she forced herself to turn and leave.

"You're in a good mood," Jon said, entering the kitchen. He'd discarded his tie, white coat, and briefcase, and crossed to the drawer where he kept his glucose monitor. He glanced over to where Kai stood, one hand braced on the counter, adding various spices to a bowl. "I take it the study session went well?"

Kai glanced over his shoulder and grinned.

"That good, huh?" Jon pricked his finger with the lancet and squeezed some blood onto the test strip. "Is she going to help you pass history, or just sex ed?" Jon chuckled.

Kai stopped what he was doing, both hands gripping the counter now. He took a deep breath before turning his head enough to look at Jon. "Speaking of good moods . . . ?" He raised an eyebrow.

Jon held his meter in one hand, waiting for the reading. He couldn't help smiling. "I think I have a date."

"That's great," Kai said, his voice clipped. Supporting himself with one hand on the countertop, he reached for a mixing spoon. Jon heard Kai's breath hitch, saw his forearm tense. "Wait. What do you mean 'you think'?" Jon listened carefully to Kai's voice, but it seemed normal enough, watching as his brother stirred everything together, coating the chickpeas with spices.

Jon noticed the oven was preheating and Kai had set a cookie sheet on the stove top. He put his meter back in the drawer and grabbed the foil, gesturing with it. Kai nodded, so he began covering it as he spoke.

"Vicky asked me to go to a party with her."

"Vicky. As in, pulm section office manager, Vicky?"

Jon nodded, a slight blush pinking his cheeks. Jon was surprised when Kai merely smiled, rather than laughing.

"I always thought she had a thing for you. Poor woman." Kai accepted the tray from his brother and sprayed it with Pam. Jon observed Kai moved stiffly, cautiously, despite his joviality.

"Funny. Can I do something?"

As soon as Kai set the cookie sheet back on the stovetop, he resumed his earlier posture, gripping the counter, shoulders tensed. Jon's eyes scanned down, surprised to see Kai's right leg bent at the knee. Kai rarely favored his left leg, and alarm flags that Jon had struggled to suppress began to fly.

"Yeah. I'm making chickpea tacos." Kai's knuckles whitened, his sentences clipped. "If you want . . . to chop . . . some lettuce . . . and tomatoes . . ."

Jon resisted the urge to say anything, shuffling to the fridge and grabbing the produce. "It's a costume party, if you can believe it."

This time, Kai laughed a controlled chuckle and released his deathgrip on the counter. Maybe he was just tired, Jon reasoned, watching as Kai spooned the legumes onto the cookie sheet.

"Now *that* I can't wait to see. You should go as a pill. It'd be fitting on many levels."

"And aren't you a comedian." Jon shook the lettuce off in the sink, water dripping. Then he grabbed a cutting board. "Hand me a knife?"

Kai again braced himself with one hand on the counter while he stretched to pull a knife from the block. He grimaced, paused, before handing the knife to his brother.

"You OK?" Jon took it, but focused on Kai, who was trying to keep his face neutral and not succeeding very well. Jon could see Kai's hands clenched on the counter's edge.

Kai's head was bowed, his eyes tightly shut. He took a few slow, careful breaths. "I'm fine," Kai said through clenched teeth, but his grip grew tighter, and he didn't open his eyes. He tried to shift his weight; looked for a moment like he was going to lose his balance, let out a muffled, indistinct sound before taking a few more cautious breaths.

Jon set the knife down. "Kai, you're not fine."

Kai didn't answer immediately. He was holding himself as still as he could, although he still wavered slightly, his forearms tensing. Finally, he shook his head.

"Spasms?"

Kai sucked in a breath, lifted his head. A slight nod. "I . . ." Kai's voice cut off. Jon could see his brother had shifted so he leaned even more heavily on the counter, as if he were trying to bear as much of his weight as possible with his upper body. His right knee remained partially

bent, his foot pointed. Jon couldn't tell, but he suspected Kai's right posterior thigh and calf muscles were spasming.

Kai's face contorted, his jaw tensing. Despite his best efforts, quiet grunts escaped his lips. Either the pain had lasted long enough it was chipping away his defenses, or the spasms were getting worse.

"Kai, I can finish this, if . . ."

Kai finally looked at Jon, his eyes wide, his face pale and strained. "I thought . . ." He paused, took a few quick, shallow breaths. ". . . I could work through it."

Jon glanced at the tray of their half-prepped dinner and realized Kai had hoped to beat the pain by keeping busy; obviously, he'd misjudged the severity of the attack. "Kai—"

"Jon," Kai said suddenly through gritted teeth. "I need to take my braces off, now." Kai's previously steady voice broke. His face was flushed, sweat standing out on his forehead. "My left hamstrings feel like they're trying to rip off the bone." Pain colored his words, his breathing labored.

Kai kept his left brace locked. If his hamstrings were spasming severely enough—trying to bend his knee—the orthotic could break, or the muscles or tendon could tear. And because Kai's right was also spasming, unlocking the left would make it impossible for Kai to stay upright.

"I'll get your chair."

Oh, fuck, he hurt. This wasn't a mild attack, or even a moderate one. All the stress of the past few days had built up. Kai had to get off his feet, had to unlock his left knee. Carefully, he lowered himself to the floor, the muscles in his feet and calves twitching. Immediately, he reached over to release the lock on his left brace, his leg pulling up, knee bent, as if the lock had been a spring under pressure and all the energy released at once. Kai bit back a scream, sweat breaking out on his forehead.

Kai's body, from his mid back to his toes, hurt, pain flaring up as a muscle would spasm, sometimes relaxing and giving him a moment's relief. Mostly they'd stayed taunt, as if the various muscle fibers were competing to see who could tense the most and longest. Like some twisted, painful variation on a staring contest. Although Jon was likely only gone a minute or two, the waiting was literal agony, and Kai hated that he had to rely on his brother. It was partially his own fault, he knew; the early warning signs of an attack had been there all afternoon, but he'd ignored them. And now he was paying for it.

He clenched his teeth as the spasms in the back of both legs intensified. Hoping for some relief, Kai worked his left hand under his left thigh, pressing up, struggling to rub away some of the pain through the denim of his jeans and the leather backing of his brace. A pulling pain in his right knee distracted him. Already, it seemed, his quads were battling with his hamstrings, straining the tendons and ligaments of his knee joint. It felt like his kneecap was going to rip off, the muscles around his knee tensing to their limit, then partially relaxing, before tensing again. Each time, the contractions grew worse: tighter, holding longer, the reprieves shorter.

Jon reappeared, pushing Kai's chair. "I brought your MR," Jon said, frowning at Kai's position on the floor, offering him some pills.

"Already," Kai said, leaning his head back against the cabinet, not wanting to say more.

Jon nodded, shoved the pills in his pocket. Without another word, Jon maneuvered Kai's wheelchair closer and set the brake.

Kai's glutes had joined the pain parade, making shifting from his current position even less appealing. But he desperately wanted to go to his room so he could take his braces off, try to massage the worst of the spasms away and hope the sedative effect of the meds kicked in and knocked him out before things got much worse.

"Looks like you had a better weekend than me," Diane said, dumping her bag on the floor and sinking into the couch with a groan. "Remind me again why I go home?"

Renee was still buzzing from her afternoon with Kai, eager to discuss it with her roomie. But she knew Diane had a love-hate relationship with her family, and often came back from her visits more stressed than when she'd left.

"You love them?" Renee attempted, curling up next to Diane and offering her a sideways hug.

Diane sank into the embrace, resting her head on Renee's shoulder. "So. Tell me why you're particularly effervescent this evening."

Renee giggled and shifted so she faced Diane, practically bouncing on her knees, her legs tucked under her. "He kissed me."

"What?" Diane sat up. "Hot blond? 'He's completely out of my league, but I'll moon over him anyway'? I thought you said he had a girlfriend."

Renee deflated. She'd managed to forget the phone call, focusing on the feel of his lips against hers, but Diane was right. "I think he does."

Diane's eyebrows dipped, growing angry. "So, what, he thinks you'll just give it up for him and be a nice piece of ass he can enjoy on the side? You said you weren't going to do the asshole guy thing again."

Renee sighed, but she smiled despite herself, fingertips touching her lips. "I don't think he is, though. I think . . . I don't know the whole story, but I think . . ." Renee looked at Diane, trying to convey through her eyes what she couldn't seem to find words for. "When he kissed me . . . it was like I was the only woman in the world. It was . . . incredible."

Diane sighed. "So he's a good kisser. Probably has had lots of practice," Diane muttered.

Renee pouted. "I have a good feeling about Kai."

"And I bet you felt the same way about Jude when you first met him. Or that guy from freshman year, what was his name?"

"Mark," Renee said reluctantly. "This is different, though."

Diane pushed herself to her feet, yawning. "Think I'll crash." She bent for her bag. "Just . . . be careful, OK? I don't want you hurt because some dreamy player ensnared you in his web. And I don't care how big he is: I'll kick his ass if he uses you."

Kai opened his eyes slowly, with a grunt. He lay on his right side, back to the wall, curled up in an almost fetal position. His legs refused to relax, and as consciousness returned, so did the pain, slamming into him like a freight train. He groaned again before he realized he wasn't alone. Jon sat in a chair beside Kai's bed, a medical journal open in his lap. His face was lined with worry and concern. As soon as Jon realized his brother was awake, he lay a cautious hand on Kai's arm.

"It's OK, Kai. I'm here."

Kai tried to reach down to his toes to hopefully stretch them out of the position in which they were locked, which felt like someone was trying to pull them off his body. It was as if an invisible hand held them in a firm grip, flexed up or down, and was straining with all its strength to rend flesh from bone. But Kai couldn't reach, not without bending, and his locked back and hip muscles wouldn't allow it. The little movement he could manage was dizzyingly painful, and after a few attempts, seeing stars, Kai had to give up. He struggled to breathe, not easy with his tight back, so he settled for short, quick, shallow breaths.

Kai felt Jon's hands on one foot, trying to work out some of the tension. When he spoke, his voice was apologetic. "I tried to massage out the hypertonia while you slept, but . . . I couldn't. Not without risking injury. I'm sorry. How bad is the pain?"

Kai didn't answer. He felt nauseated, whether from the pain, or the drugs, or an empty stomach, he wasn't sure. He had to remind himself to breathe, even though not doing so meant a slight reprieve from some of the pain. His eyes drifted closed. Jon stroked Kai's arm soothingly.

"I know it hurts, but you need to breathe," Jon said in a soft voice.

Kai concentrated on taking slow, deep breaths. Breathing this way was less painful than trying to breathe normally, and less risky than the near hyperventilation of earlier.

"More MR?"

Jon sighed heavily and smoothed some of Kai's hair out of his face, where it had stuck, plastered with sweat. "It's only been two hours, and your breathing isn't great as-is. I can't risk it."

Kai forced his eyes open to meet his brother's gaze. Jon looked helpless and heartbroken, and Kai realized his brother had never seen his MLS this bad. It didn't often exacerbate this severely, thankfully, but Kai had been stressing about so much lately, it was honestly a miracle it hadn't happened sooner.

Kai said nothing. His hips ached all the way down to the bone, as if pain radiated up from the marrow, the tiny tendons and ligaments inside his pelvis stretched and angry. He took in as deep a breath as he could, braced his left hip with one hand, and pressed tentatively on his thigh.

Fuck.

He had to clench his teeth hard to stifle a scream. His leg wasn't going anywhere; Jon hadn't lied about that. Kai closed his eyes, concentrated on breathing through the pain that seemed to hum through his left leg. Two hours until he could have another dose. That seemed like an eternity. Reflexively, he moaned. Jon took his hand and squeezed it supportively.

"If the pain is . . ." Jon hesitated. "We could go to the hospital. They have more powerful muscle relaxants and analgesics, and they can give you respiratory support if you need it. . . ."

"You're such a doctor sometimes," Kai said, trying for levity, but pain leaked into his voice. The truth was, he wanted the pain to remit, for his muscles to relax, but he didn't want another trip to the ER. He didn't want to be intubated, either, which he knew they would do if they had to give him the strong, full-body paralytic muscle relaxants normally used for surgical anesthesia, the only meds that worked when his MLS got this bad. Although the reality was, once his muscles locked like this, only time and physically massaging them loose could do the trick. The main issue was pain. Could he wait until he could take another dose of meds that would knock him out? Could he bear the agony of trying to manually relax his muscles? Kai opened his eyes and met his brother's frown, realizing his breathing had become irregular again.

"If you won't let me take you to the hospital, then I should call your neurologist."

Kai wanted to protest, but could see in Jon's face that his brother needed to do *something*. If calling would make Jon relax, then so be it. And it'd give Kai some time alone, hopefully, to try to stretch out anything he could bear to.

"OK. Help me sit up." Although Kai knew he could manage without Jon, it would make his brother feel useful and probably be less painful this way. "My back against the wall."

Kai took a few steadying breaths, then offered Jon his hand. Pushing with his right hand against the bed, and tugging his left through Jon's grip, Kai pulled himself into the semblance of a seated position, withholding a grunt as his back complained from the shift. His legs were still folded, but gravity pushed them down slightly, his hips screaming in complaint and making him pant with pain. Dizziness washed over him suddenly, and he had to use his hands to prop himself up. He clenched his eyes shut.

"Kai?" Jon said, alarmed.

Kai focused, calmed his breathing, tried to let his body relax into its new position as much as possible. Now that he was upright, he found himself clinging to consciousness, the pain in his back, hips, and legs threatening to overwhelm him. Nausea hovered in the back of his throat. He vaguely felt the mattress dip, and a hand stroking his arm.

"It'll be 'K, K," Jon said.

Kai let his head fall back against the wall and cautiously opened his eyes. He still felt off, but the pain had subsided enough that he was no longer on the brink of passing out. Jon's hand moved over his and he let his brother grip him supportively.

"Has it ever been this bad?" Jon's voice was a cracked whisper.

Kai focused on taking slow, regular breaths. "Yes. Not in a long time, but. . . . When I was in high school. . . ." Kai hesitated. "It happened enough my neuro put me on Mexitil."

Jon squeezed Kai's hand, his brows furrowed. "Isn't that an antiarrhythmic?"

"Yeah, but it also works on skeletal muscle." Kai sighed, then groaned as the expansion of his chest tweaked his taunt back muscles. He managed to reach his right foot and start working his fingers on his toes, trying to relieve the tension there.

"Hmm. It decreases action potential duration, making it harder for the muscle to sustain the contraction. So your muscles relax more easily, and it's more difficult for myotonia to set in. Would prevent tetanization," Jon muttered to himself. "Did it work?"

Kai gritted his teeth as he managed to free his index toe from its locked state. "Yeah. Kept my legs from locking up like this." Kai hissed as he shifted to another toe, kneading the flesh of the base of his toes with his fingers, trying to loosen the taunt muscles.

"If it helped, why did you stop taking it?"

Kai sighed. "The side effects. I took it a couple years, then decided I'd rather deal with the pain." Kai closed his eyes, remembering. He'd gained twenty pounds after coming off the drug, because it had caused such severe nausea he'd barely been able to keep anything down. And he'd needed his crutches less, too, since he no longer had the dizziness and coordination problems the Mexitil caused. Or the constant juggling of his theophylline dose, which left him in a perpetual swing between frequent attacks and the near-overdose that sent his heart racing terrifyingly in his chest. Kai smoothed his hand over his foot. Then he braced the ankle, using his other hand to bend the joint, cautiously stretching his tight calf muscles.

Kai found his muscles were beginning to relax as he spoke. They were still tight, and it'd take massage to fully relax everything, but maybe talking, distracting himself, had helped. Or maybe simply enough time had elapsed. Either way, he found he could stretch a little without screaming or passing out, and that was relieving enough.

Jon frowned deeply. "So if I call your neuro, he's going to suggest you go back on Mexitil."

Kai nodded. "If I start having episodes like this often, I'll consider it. But otherwise. . . ." Kai carefully set his foot down and let his head fall back against the wall, his eyes sliding shut. His pain level was still high, and he suddenly realized how exhausted he was. It'd been such a long time since he'd had a severe MLS attack, he'd forgotten that it was more draining than a long workout. Add to the fact that he was still recovering from the other night, and. . . .

The bed shifted again, and he felt Jon's hands on his left ankle. "Can I help?"

Kai nodded slowly. "Start with my right," he said, forcing out the words. The muscles of his left leg still felt strained, as if they were the strings on a guitar, over-tuned and threatening to snap.

Jon obeyed, cautiously stretching Kai's Achilles, trying to loosen the contracted muscle fibers in Kai's calf. "I'm sorry," Jon said as he worked.

"For what? Last time I checked, you didn't make my muscles lock," Kai said, his voice strained. He forced his eyes open, hoping Jon would see the joke in them, even if he couldn't seem to manage the effort to put it into his tone or expression.

"Just. . . . for everything. For not always being there when you needed me." Jon's voice was broken, sad.

Kai sighed, but it hitched from pain, and he forced himself to breathe out slowly. "Jon. I'm not going to say this again." He clenched his teeth, working his fingers into the back of his knee. "What happened with Jenny. . . . If you think focusing on your work—on me—is some kind of penance. . . ."

While Jon continued to work on Kai's right leg, Kai carefully kneaded the muscles of his left thigh.

"Go out with Vicky. Have fun with her. Or whomever. Just . . . be happy, Jon." Kai bit back a cry, his eyes beginning to fill as Jon managed to partially stretch Kai's full right leg, his knee remaining only partially bent. "For your own sake." Kai paused to take several shallow breaths. "If . . . when . . . I'm gone, I'd like to know you're happy."

Jon dropped Kai's leg so suddenly Kai screamed. "Sorry," Jon muttered quickly. "What do you mean, '*When I'm gone*'?!"

Kai's head swam in dizziness, struggling to breathe. Tears escaped his eyes as he cradled his right leg, his hands seeking to soothe the overly stretched hamstrings. His vision darkened on its edges.

"Jon . . ." Kai's eyes shut, but he still felt like he was swaying, unconsciousness tugging at him. His hands fell away, his shoulders sagged, and he let the darkness take him.

"Fuck, Kai." Jon rushed to ease his brother's slumped form down on the bed, carefully arranging stiff legs. Jon had known the pain had to have been bad, could see and feel the severity of the contracted muscles, but Kai was even better at masking himself than Jon thought, if he'd lost consciousness.

"I'm sorry," Jon whispered, smoothing hair off Kai's face. He realized his brother's clothes were damp with sweat, even though Kai had changed only a couple hours earlier, when he'd removed his orthotics. Jon rose and crossed to the dresser, pulling out a fresh T-shirt and cotton drawstring pants.

Jon couldn't do much, and he hated feeling helpless or useless, but he could get Kai into fresh clothes, maybe stretch him. Hopefully, by the time Kai woke again, he'd feel better. If only marginally so, it was still something.

Carefully, Jon eased Kai's arms out of his shirt, getting it over his head and tossing it aside. Kai's breathing was low, but even. Jon's eyes were immediately drawn to two healing bruises and scabs on Kai's shoulders. He leaned forward to examine the marks. They had healed well, and were beginning to fade, the ring of scabs clearly indicative of a human bite. Jon frowned. He could imagine how Kai had gotten them.

Jon used Kai's dirty shirt to dry his skin, taking the opportunity to check the rest of his torso for marks. First, he noticed the bruising on Kai's left wrist, around the rubber band. Jon frowned. He scanned up the rest of Kai's arm, gasping when he saw another healing scab surrounded by bruising in the nook of Kai's left elbow. This mark was fresher than those on his neck. And it was a single scab, looking like it came from a needle, perhaps a 20 gauge.

Jon's stomach clenched, glancing up at Kai's sleeping face. There had to be a perfectly innocent explanation. Maybe Kai had had blood taken recently. Kai certainly didn't tell Jon everything. Maybe he'd had a follow-up with Dr. J or his nephrologist. That had to be it. Post transplant, Kai's life was filled with regular bloodwork, to check for infection, to monitor his kidney and liver function, and to make sure the dosage of his immunosuppressants was still satisfactory.

Still, Jon's stomach churned uneasily. He checked Kai's other arm, grateful to find it unmarred except for the faintest hint of bruising mid-forearm, probably from the cuff of his crutch. Jon pulled his fingers through his hair several times, feeling like his head was spinning. He still heard Kai's words echoing: *when I'm gone*. What had he meant by that?

Jon knew Kai's body could reject his lungs at any time, that he could develop an opportunistic infection, that five-year survival was 50%; ten, less than 30%. Kai knew this, too. It could be what he meant, but somehow, the way Kai had said it. . . .

Jon's eyes flew to Kai's scars, his fingers searching them for any sign of new wounds. The long line down his sternum, then the less obvious hemicircles below his pecs, then the smaller

mark on his abdomen. None were fresh. Perhaps Jon was taking Kai's behavior and transferring his own history on his brother, seeing signs that weren't there.

Kai continued to sleep, so Jon gently slipped the new shirt on him, moving next to Kai's pants. He debated not disturbing Kai's legs, but felt he had to prove his fears unfounded by checking the scars on Kai's thighs. Carefully, slowly, he eased Kai's sweaty pants off, relieved Kai's muscles seemed to be relaxing. Jon might be able to stretch him at last.

Jon searched out the scars, mostly hidden by the light dusting of golden-brown hair that coated Kai's legs. Jon knew the best place to hide fresh cuts was in old scars, in places no one would see because clothing obscured them. Kai had explained that these marks—when Jon had first asked about them—came from a pair of ill-fitting braces when he was younger. Although Jon was relieved the skin wasn't freshly broken, he began to question the truth of Kai's story. Perhaps, growing up, Kai had found his own way of coping, a method Jon was all-too familiar with. Jon knew what that dark voice was like, how it didn't respond to logic or reason. It threatened to overwhelm, with seemingly only one way to escape its haunting grasp.

Diagnosis wasn't much different than detective work. You took the clues you had and used them to arrive at your conclusion. It was part science, part skill, and part gut feeling. And although Jon knew he could explain away Kai's behavior, moodiness, and minor injuries individually, experience taught Jon coincidence was an illusion. If a patient came in with seemingly disparate signs and symptoms, it was possible they had several things wrong with them. But more likely, it meant one thing was at the root of it all.

For some time now, Jon's instinct had been screaming worrying thoughts about his brother. It had taken years for Jon to overcome his own demons; he still battled with guilt on a daily basis, but had managed to substitute work to satisfy the voice. Jon had kept truths from Kai about his own past, about their mother, deciding that sometimes, ignorance was bliss. But maybe it was time for Jon to confront Kai. To tell his brother the truth.

September 8, 2000

Kai's eyes shot open in the dark of his room, his breath coming in panting gasps, his hair clinging to his head, damp with sweat. He pushed himself up, trying to focus, calm his racing heart and ease his ragged breathing. A quick glance at his alarm clock made him groan. 3:34. The nightmare had woken him, again.

Sunday and Monday nights, Kai had slept decently enough, mostly due to exhaustion and Valium. But every other night since, the same nightmare that had preceded his trip to the ER had returned to strip him, panicked, from sleep. He'd been lucky to manage a couple hours, and three nights of this, plus the lingering effects of both the FS and MLS attacks meant he was exhausted. He'd avoided taking anything to try to help him sleep; as a general rule Kai didn't take anything sedating or with the potential for addiction any more than he had to.

He snatched his inhaler from the bedside table, shook it, and took two puffs, trying his best to give the medicine time to sink down into his lungs. He'd had recurring nightmares before, when he was young. But never anything like these. The whole experience felt so real, like he was actually buried alive, like he really was suffocating. The terror so visceral and immediate. Every. Single. Time. Kai wasn't even sure if his response was due to his FS, or psychological, an anxiety attack that mimicked the symptoms of suffocation and fear.

His body was beginning to calm, and his breathing came more easily, so he let himself lie back, his eyelids falling closed. So. Tired. He'd been too worn out and in too much residual pain to go to class Tuesday, and as much as he'd wanted to see Renee Wednesday, he knew his legs were still too uncooperative to manage the stairs to the back row. At least his braces had held up. Thanks to Jon, Kai had been able to afford titanium-magnesium alloy uprights for his current KAFOs, which meant they were light, yet strong. So today he'd put them on and attempt his two morning classes. Maybe seeing Renee again would make him feel better. He could still taste her: sweet, faintly of lip gloss and coffee.

He felt himself drifting. Maybe he could snag a couple more hours of sleep before he had to start his day. Maybe.

Renee's entire body seemed to ignite when she looked up and saw Kai in his usual seat in the back row of the auditorium. She hurried up the stairs, then decided to slow down and relax her face. She didn't want to seem too excited to see him, in case Diane was right and he really had meant to blow her off. In case the kiss—which still made her stomach flutter every time she thought about it—hadn't meant anything to him. In case he thought it was a huge mistake, and was hoping they could go back to the way things were before it happened.

The first thing she noticed as she drew closer was how tired he looked. Slouched instead of sitting up straight, eyes shut, almost as if he were asleep. As she got up the last few steps, she could see dark circles under his eyes, and the hint of stubble when the light hit his face just right, his blond hair nearly invisible against his skin otherwise. He was always clean shaven, and it looked like he hadn't bothered to shave in a few days.

As quietly as possible, she sat down, hoping not to wake him. He certainly looked like he needed the sleep. Either she wasn't as stealthy as she thought, or he hadn't been asleep, because she'd barely hit the seat when his eyes opened, a sweet smile slipping across his face as soon as he saw her.

"Hey."

"Hey," she echoed, returning his smile, feeling a strange, yet wonderful sensation course through her body.

That wasn't a smile that said their kiss was a mistake. She hadn't even realized how much she'd needed that reassurance until it happened.

"I thought maybe you were avoiding me."

He used his hands to push himself up, so he wasn't slouching anymore. He looked at her, and his face rapidly shifted through a range of emotions, too fast for her to distinguish them individually. "Oh, sh—I'm sorry, Re. I . . ." His voice dropped off, as if he were unable to find the rest of his sentence.

She noticed him rub the heel of his hand on his left thigh. "Did your missing class have anything to do with your leg?" Renee's boldness seemed to surprise them both, and he immediately stopped rubbing his leg.

He opened his mouth, then closed it, glanced down at the front of the auditorium, as if hoping the professor would walk in and end their conversation.

Suddenly anxious, she eased her hand into his. For a moment, she feared he'd pull away, but instead, he squeezed it. When he turned his head, some of his exhaustion seemed to have melted away, replaced by a complex expression she couldn't quite determine. A mixture of relief and uncertainty and hope.

"Yes," he said in a whisper, looking down at their hands.

She reached up with her other hand, smoothing his cheek, feeling the tickle of stubble against her skin. Not sure what to say next, desperate to feel his lips against hers again, she reveled in their touch. *Let him tell you. Don't push*, Renee reminded herself. Talking about himself obviously wasn't easy, and whatever the story was behind his leg, it was a struggle for him to share. She already felt like he'd let her in more in the short time they'd known each other than he did for most, and that didn't even include the kiss.

"It's a long story, right?"

He looked away, swallowed hard, shrugged.

Offering a hand squeeze and a smile, she said, "Then we can leave it until this afternoon, after class. We'll grab a bite and you can tell me then. If you want to," she added, realizing she really didn't have a right to know if he wasn't ready. They may have shared one kiss, but it wasn't like they were boyfriend/girlfriend. Yet.

He let out a long whoosh of breath, as if he hadn't breathed in the last few minutes. Then he looked up at her with a simple, relieved smile. "OK. OK." He inhaled sharply, as if to buoy himself. "I'm meeting someone at four, but it shouldn't take long. We could do something after that?"

She nodded, smiling.

Their attention was momentarily drawn to the front of the lecture hall, where the professor had arrived and was setting up.

"I have . . ." He took in a deep breath. "I won't be in philosophy."

She looked over at him, but his gaze was still fixed on the professor.

"Didn't want you to be surprised when I didn't show."

Her eyebrows furrowed. "All right. I'll see you this afternoon, then?"

Kai sat on the exam table, pushed all the way back so the wall supported him. His back hurt, and the nearly full-body soreness still hummed just beneath the surface, a constant reminder of the MLS attack of Monday. He closed his eyes and tried not to think about what Dr. J might have to say. Instead, he let his mind turn to Renee. She'd looked different today. He couldn't quite say why; maybe it was the simple fact that after days apart, it was nice to see her face again. She'd tried to hide it, but she'd been excited to see him, relieved he hadn't been avoiding her. God, he felt awful that the idea had ever plagued her. He should have called her.

He wondered what she'd think about him once he told her about his MLS. He hadn't lied. But Jake had insisted his hiding it was enough of a deception. Would she feel betrayed? Would she decide she didn't want to see him anymore? It really wasn't a big deal. Jake was right. He should have told her from the beginning, got it out there. His stomach cramped. So far, she'd

handled everything well. They'd kissed! She might have questions, but she'd be OK with it. And it'd be nice to have one less thing about himself he needed to hide from her.

"Sorry to keep you waiting." Dr. Johnsen's voice snapped Kai out of his reverie. "We really did squeeze you in." Without waiting for Kai to respond, Dr. J grabbed the stool, wheeled it closer, and sat. "So what's going on?"

Kai sighed and nudged his chin toward the medical file in Dr. J's hands. "I'm sure you know better than me."

Dr. Johnsen flipped through the file absently before shutting it and laying it in his lap. He leaned forward. "I'll be honest with you, Kai. I don't know much more of what's going on than the fellow who treated you in the ER. If you were any other patient, I'd pull your brother in for a consult—"

"No," Kai said firmly. "I want to figure out what's going on before getting Jon involved. He'll just freak."

Dr. J nodded. He opened the file again, reviewing its contents. "Your X-ray was normal, your bloodwork fine. Your sats and peak flow were acceptable today. . . . How have you been feeling since Sunday?"

Kai swept the hair off his face. "I had a bad MLS attack Monday. . . ." He hesitated a moment, then added, "And . . . I've been having nightmares. Every night, the same one. And I always wake up, struggling to breathe."

Dr. J frowned, stood up, and set the file aside. "How bad are these attacks?" He pulled his stethoscope out of his pocket.

Kai sighed and used his hands to push himself away from the wall. "I'm usually OK after I use my inhaler and a few minutes pass, but . . . obviously, I haven't been sleeping well."

Dr. Johnsen's eyebrows dipped sternly, and he moved closer, positioning the earbuds of his stethoscope in each ear, rubbing the end to warm it up. "Does this happen more than once a night?"

"Almost every time I fall asleep."

Dr. J slipped the head of the stethoscope under the back of Kai's shirt. "Just breathe normally." He moved the stethoscope around Kai's back, listening carefully in each spot. "OK, slow, deep breaths now." After several minutes, Dr. J shifted the stethoscope to Kai's chest, checking his heart, before removing it and slinging it over his neck. He sighed heavily.

"It's all in my head, isn't it," Kai said before the doctor could speak. "I sound fine."

"You do sound fine," Dr. J agreed. "But that doesn't mean there isn't something going on. I read the notes from the ER the other night. That attack was real, and your sats were way down."

"So what do we do?" Kai asked, looking forlorn.

Dr. J sighed and scrunched his face up. "How's your nightly peak flow been?"

Kai shrugged. "OK. In the 90s." Generally, peak flow values above ninety-percent were considered good, so the fact that his were OK each night, yet he still was waking with labored breathing was yet another perplexing part of the puzzle.

"What about your PO₂?" Dr. J had settled back on the stool and was scribbling notes.

"Uh . . ."

He stopped abruptly and looked up. "You're telling me you live with Jon Taylor and you don't check your sats regularly?" Dr. J laughed softly. "This is what we're going to do. I'm going to write you a script for some oral steroids. I know it's not ideal if you're having trouble sleeping, but if this is a rejection issue, it'll buy us some time to figure things out, and it might help with the attacks. Make sure you take the last dose at three PM." Dr. J scribbled quickly. "I also want you to check your peak flow and sats three times a day, and record the numbers. And I'd like you to come in for some more tests, see if we can figure out what's going on here."

"What are you thinking?" Kai said in a sigh, shoulders hunched.

"Draw some more blood before you go, then get you in for another X-ray, a methacholine challenge, a biopsy, and a full pulm function test. Cover all our bases."

Kai nodded. "Can't wait." He sighed.

"I know things have been stressful lately. You've had a lot to adjust to, and now you have school. . . . And I know Jon works too much." Dr. Johnsen took in a breath. "You might want to consider talking to someone. About the nightmares."

Kai groaned.

"It wouldn't have to be the same psych the transplant committee made you see," Dr. J said, trying to reassure Kai. "I know a few good doctors I could refer you to. You might find it helpful, and it might alleviate your stress. Which isn't making things any better." Dr. J pulled some business cards out of one of his white coat pockets and thumbed through them quickly, finally handing a few to Kai.

Kai stared at the first card. *Dr. Angela Miller, MD. Child, Adolescent, Adult Psychiatry. Board-Certified. Specialist in Adjustment Disorder, PTSD, Personality Disorders.* Without bothering to read the rest, Kai let his head drop; his exhaustion seemed to magnify. He'd been forced to see a shrink a few times in his life, and each time had resented it. The first was when his parents died, the state convinced a psychologist could help him get over the trauma that was keeping him mute. Thankfully, it wasn't long before they realized no amount of therapy was going to get the sickly, tiny blond boy to speak, and he'd been able to return to kindergarten at the deaf school. Most recently, he'd had six months of psych visits, one of the requirements of the transplant program. Kai had been very careful in what he said and how so that he could get through the mandatory sessions without making waves or throwing up red flags. Shrinks didn't work, because they thought they knew all the answers. Sometimes, there simply weren't any.

"I'll think about it," Kai muttered.

Dr. J put a hand on Kai's shoulder. "It's not uncommon to feel depressed or off-keel after a transplant. I think if you found a good therapist, whom you felt comfortable with. . . . You can't keep everything to yourself forever, Kai. Sooner or later, it has to come out."

"Why am I not surprised to find you here?" Dr. Johnsen grabbed a chair and sat in it, backwards, next to Jon.

The lounge on this floor was small and empty, especially at this time of day. The smell of stale, burnt coffee lingered in the air. Jon was bent over some paperwork, his hair a tangled mess, one of his hands working through it absently as he concentrated. He barely acknowledged the other man's presence.

"You do realize, Dr. Howser, that you have an office. And you're not a fellow anymore."

Jon finally looked up at Dr. J, who was smirking. "I told you never to call me that," Jon growled.

Because Jon had graduated high school early and done a six-year combined undergrad/MD program, when he started his medicine residency, he was only twenty-two, the youngest of his class by four years—at least—most of the residents were in their late twenties, or even into their thirties. He was also brilliant, so he'd quickly earned the nickname "Doogie" or "Dr. Howser," after the TV show character. Jon hated it, but had never been able to shake the nickname, even when he became chief resident. Even his attendings often called him Dr. Howser instead of Taylor, and when he graduated, the head of the department had given him a white coat with the joke name embroidered on it, as if it really were his. During the first year of Jon's fellowship, Dr. J had found the coat in Jon's office and immediately taken to the nickname. At thirty, Jon was not only the youngest staff pulmonologist, he was also younger than nearly all the fellows below him.

"Fine. It's meant as a compliment, you know. Dave and I still can't believe you stayed here. National Jewish would have loved to have you," Dr. J remarked, referring to one of the top pulmonary centers in the country, located in Denver.

Jon ignored him, focusing intently on the documents in front of him.
Dr. J sighed. "We need to talk. Come on. I'll buy you a real coffee."

"Here. Against my better judgment: triple espresso. Black," Dr. J said, setting the paper cup in front of Jon. A Starbucks kiosk had opened on the first floor of the hospital, intended for outpatients and families of inpatients, but had quickly become a hangout for hospital staff craving their caffeine in something other than "sludge." Dr. J took his seat across from Jon, sipping his latte.

"So what did I do?" Jon asked, opening the lid of his to cool it.

"We're not here to talk about you. Well, maybe a little," Dr. J admitted, looking around. They'd retreated to a group of couches ensconced in a nook off the lobby, and were alone despite the bustle of traffic they could hear moving through the busy foyer just feet away. "How has Kai been adjusting, do you think?" Dr. J asked with one raised eyebrow.

Jon cradled his cup in both hands, staring down into its darkness. "I've been a little concerned. . . . Why? Have you seen him lately? Did he say something?" Jon's head popped up, scrutinizing.

Dr. J sighed and masked his face with several sips of coffee. "You know I couldn't tell you, unless—"

Jon almost spilled his drink. "Unless you think he's going to harm himself. Ben—"

"Don't put words in my mouth, Jon," Dr. J cautioned. "But you are worried about him."

Jon took a few swigs of his espresso, then nodded. "I don't have any real evidence; it's just a hunch, based on his behavior, some things he's said, that kind of thing, but . . ."

Dr. J shifted in his seat. "You have the best gut of any physician I've ever worked with. If it's telling you something, you need to trust it."

Jon sighed heavily. "I'm worried Kai might be . . . overly stressed. Maybe depressed." He pulled his fingers through his hair. "I think he'd talk to me more if my ASL were better, but . . ."

"Then hire a tutor. I know you care about your brother, and you're obviously worried about him. Make time for improving your sign language. Make time for him. Maybe that's all he really needs." Dr. J leaned forward. "A transplant is a life-changing experience. And you know that thoracic surgery often puts a patient's emotions in flux. Without support from friends and family. . . . Kai needs you now more than ever."

"So this is my fault," Jon said quietly.

Dr. J rolled his eyes, suppressing a sigh. "If Kai is depressed, it's not necessarily your fault, but making time for him will help. Maybe you can convince him to see someone again. Maybe you both should."

Kai shifted his weight on the bench. His legs ached, especially his calves, but without taking his braces off, he couldn't really massage them. He leaned back on his hands, stretching his back, resisting the urge to check the time again. Becca was late, not surprisingly. Kai shut his eyes, breathing slowly, pulling himself away from pain and stress and everything, focusing on the dance of color behind his lids.

"You finish already?"

"Huh? What?" Kai blinked, recovering slowly. It took him a moment to realize Renee was sitting next to him, and was the one who had spoken.

She laughed, musical, lilting, tossing her curls a bit. "The person you were meeting."

"Oh," he said with a slight shake of his head. "No. I'm still waiting." He sighed, cradled his neck. "Might be a no show. Wouldn't be surprised."

Renee smiled at him, and couldn't resist the urge to trace a finger along his jawline, up to his sideburn, shifting some hair off his face. He let his eyes fall closed, leaning into her touch, a soft sigh escaping his lips. Encouraged, she lightly traced his ear, sending a shiver through his body.

"Re," Kai breathed. Her touch managed to make him forget everything.

"Kai," Renee said, dropping her hand. "I think your wait is over." Her tone shifted drastically, bitter.

Kai opened his eyes suddenly, and saw her: she'd changed her hair, straightening and dying it so that it was a honey brown, lying flat against her. She wore chunky heels with a platform on the front, meaning she towered over Kai and Renee on the bench. Her makeup was heavy, but carefully applied, and Kai hardly recognized her.

"Becca."

She smirked, held a hand out for Renee. "Becca Banks," she said simply.

Renee glanced at Kai, as if hoping for an explanation, before accepting the shake. "Renee Poche."

"You're thirty minutes late," Kai spat, feeling the bile rise in his throat.

Becca shrugged.

Kai glared at her, then looked at Renee, forcing his face to soften. "I'm sorry, Re. This should only take a few minutes." He nudged his head toward the center of the quad. "Let's walk and talk," he said to Becca.

"Where are your crutches?" she asked, ducking a bit to see if he'd hidden them under the bench.

Kai held in his sigh, reminding himself that Renee would know all about his MLS within the hour. "I don't need them," Kai responded flatly, arranging his feet, then bracing his hands on either side of the bench to help push himself up.

Renee watched mutely as Becca sighed and offered her hands to help pull Kai to his feet. Kai glanced at them, then looked up, his expression so searing, Becca should have jumped back. But she didn't even flinch.

"And I don't need you, either," Kai said, pushing himself to his feet. He steadied himself on his right leg, then locked his left, pushing past Becca toward the center of the quad.

Despite what he'd told Becca, Kai moved slowly, the pain in his lower legs making him wish for his crutches, or even better, his chair. Maybe he'd start Renee's education early by taking her back to his car and using his chair the rest of the evening. He'd already ignored Troy's advice to minimize his time on his feet for the week, but he didn't expect to take long with Becca. Either he'd find out quickly what she'd called him for, or he'd tell her off and walk away.

As slow as Kai moved today, Becca was slower, either intentionally—another part of her incessant mind games—or due to her five-inch heels, Kai wasn't sure. Either way, he waited, arms tightly crossed on his chest, until she finally reached him. She was disorientingly tall in those shoes; he only had a few inches over her, and wondered if that had been intentional, too.

She smiled as she drew closer, walking leg crossed over leg until she stood in front of him. "You've let your hair grow," she said. "And I like the stubble. It suits you." She grinned and reached to tuck a strand of hair behind his ear.

Kai leaned back just enough to duck her touch, although she snagged him anyway, giggling. "What do you want, Becca?"

She pouted. "You called me."

"Only after you called me. What. Do. You. Want?"

She pouted. "You know, you gave me so much shit about Phil, and look who's Mr. Plurality now." She shrugged. "Although this one—Renee, was it?—is cute. I'll give you that."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Kai's nails dug into his palms, his hands balled into tight fists. He wanted to sign, powerful, jerking movements, until his arms ached, but Becca had never learned ASL.

"Don't play dumb. Little Lulu there. And I know about Nikki."

Kai couldn't hide his surprise.

Becca laughed. "Don't look so shocked. That girl fucks everything with two legs and a hard dick. If you hadn't fucked her, I'd worry about you."

"*Fuck you,*" Kai said, unable to resist signing as he spoke. But a small part of his brain niggled. Kai and Nikki had never had any true illusions of exclusivity, and he knew she was experienced, but over the past couple weeks, especially, he'd sensed something. Something special, even if neither of them could qualify it. And yet, when he'd suggested they end it, she hadn't fought him. His hands dropped to his sides and his stomach lurched.

"So hostile. You used to be so sweet. Did you get a personality transplant, too?"

Kai squeezed his fists so tightly his fingers numbed. He shut his eyes, trying to contain his anger. He wouldn't let her bait him. Kai felt the soft brush of fingertips against his cheek. He flinched, but soon the hand cradled his jaw, another on his neck, and his body reacted to memory, leaning into the touch before he could catch himself.

The last two months before his transplant were fragmented, days blurring together into a long stretch of dying. Every time he closed his eyes, caving to exhaustion, he thought he might never open them again. And each time he woke, struggling through drugs and pain and oxygen deprivation, he'd hope to see Becca's face.

He never did.

When Kai looked at Becca again, it was through misted vision, his anger muted, and he had to blink rapidly to still the tears that threatened. "Why—" Kai's voice broke, and he had to swallow hard and try again. "Why did you leave me?"

Several quiet seconds passed, the only sound the distant roll of thunder and a warm, humid breeze. Kai realized he wasn't getting an answer, and his anger began to resurface, though a harsh ache he knew wasn't related to his health formed in his chest.

"What do you want?" Kai finally asked again, his voice nearly carried away on the wind. "Did you ever want me? Or was it just a game?"

Becca grew closer, reached up once more to drag fingers along his jaw. This time he snagged her wrist, pulling her away, his teeth clenching.

She inhaled through her nose, but he couldn't read her face other than a subtle purse of her lips. "Oh, Kai," she said with a slight shake of her head, like an adult dismissing a naive child.

"I loved you," Kai whispered.

In the distance, thunder cracked, the sky grew a shade darker, casting long shadows over them.

He forced himself to turn, to start to walk away, because maybe if he was the one to leave it wouldn't hurt. Feel less like abandonment and more like a choice. After all, hadn't that been his reason for meeting her?

Becca moved quickly, suddenly, grabbing his cheeks and kissing him.

Shocked, he stumbled backwards, nearly losing his balance. For a brief second, his mind shut down and his body reacted instinctively, meeting her kiss, those lips that he remembered so well. It should have felt right. Incredible and passionate, a spark coursing from tongue to toe. Instead, he pushed her away, relieved the momentary flare of familiarity quickly dissolved to disgust.

He knew, however much it stirred the anxiety in his gut, that Becca was officially something else he could box up and file away as part of his past to be forgotten.

"Go back to Phil," Kai said slowly, the words careful and measured, "and never contact me again." He wiped his mouth with his forearm, searching for Renee, but she was gone. When he scanned the perimeter of the quad, he saw her running off. She'd seen him lean into Becca's touch, kiss. Fuck. He'd never catch up with her.

For a moment, he stood, frozen, his hand over his mouth, his heart pounding.

"You care about her," Becca said, saddling up alongside him.

Kai resisted the urge to look at her, the words spilling out. "You never loved me."

Becca didn't answer, and after several minutes, Kai forced himself to turn. He saw Becca striding away, the wind gently blowing her hair. Once again, she'd left him alone, without any answers. But that wasn't true, Kai realized. She'd shown him his past, clearly behind him, and his future. . . . He knew Renee needed to be a part of it.

Now he just had to hope she still wanted that, too.

Kai sat in his car, his fingers fumbling to attach his handsfree device to his phone. He couldn't seem to get the plug into the jack. His mind swirled with conflicting, powerful emotions. His amateur sleuthing had served only to tell him Renee didn't live on campus, and he wasn't sure what to do next.

For one, saying goodbye—forever—to Becca should have been cathartic, but instead, he felt sick, the meager lunch he'd eaten threatening to leave his stomach. Not being able to find Renee, or even talk to her (every call had gone straight to voicemail) didn't help. Becca was gone. Renee was gone. And he'd stupidly pushed Nikki away. A small part of his brain argued he wasn't thinking straight, but the rest of him battled against it, blending with his fears over his health, his doubts and his uncertainties until his skin practically tingled from the irrational war within himself.

He managed to get the earpiece in one ear and hit the speed dial, taking a few breaths to try to steady himself, but he still felt a heaviness in his gut that wouldn't resolve easily.

"Jake. I fucked up."

"What'd you do now?" Jake said with a laugh.

"Becca," Kai said simply, as if that would explain everything.

"Kai—"

"We kissed." Kai sucked in a harsh breath. "I'm pretty sure Renee saw." A blur of curly hair jogged across the parking lot, and his heart sped its beat, but as she drew closer, he realized it definitely wasn't Renee. Too tall, the hair too long and too light.

"Pretty sure?"

Kai sighed. "Considering she ran off and isn't answering my calls, fine. She did. I'm totally fucked. Is there any way I can fix this?" Kai decided hanging out on campus was only going to make him crazy, so he hurriedly backed out of his spot, heading toward Main, not quite ready to go home, but not sure what to do with himself either.

Jake was quiet for a long moment, as if thinking. Finally, he said, "It could be worse. It's not like she walked in on the two of you having sex. You might be redeemable. . . . Wait, let me visualize that. . . ."

"Fuck, Jake." Kai braked hard at the final stop sign before Main. "You're imagining me having sex?!"

"Don't flatter yourself. I'm thinking Becca and the new girl. . . . And maybe that other chick. . . ."

Traffic was beginning to pick up—as much as traffic in Jonesville ever did, anyway, as Kai squeezed onto Main heading away from his apartment. "Glad you're taking this seriously. I call you for advice and you're turning my love life into a lesbian porno."

"Hey, lesbians are hot. I'm just pointing out some missed opportunities in your life." Jake chuckled. "Man, if things had been different in high school, you'd have dozens of little bastards running around."

Kai gripped the steering wheel tightly. "Yeah, the girls were just throwing themselves on the strange kid who didn't talk and had more hardware than a Menards."

"Shit. Kai—"

Kai zoomed past the courthouse, noting the sky was darkening, suggesting the thunderstorm would hit any minute. "Jake. It's OK. Bridge under water."

Jake laughed. Hard.

Kai's brows furrowed; he sighed. "I got the idiom wrong, didn't I."

"I think you were going for 'water under the bridge.'" Jake grew serious. "You still think in ASL when you're upset."

"You know my brain's like the rest of me: fucked up." He frowned as he passed the deli where he'd met Renee the other day, where they'd kissed, where everything had seemed so wonderful, if only for a fleeting moment. An unexpected surge of emptiness overtook him, and he had to swallow hard and focus on the road.

"You are fucked up," Jake acknowledged, and Kai could almost see his eyes smiling. "But you must really like this girl."

"*HOT-NECK*," Kai said, *I'm crazy about her*, barely resisting the urge to sign the ASL idiom, even though Jake obviously couldn't see. "I was going to come clean . . . about my MLS."

"Becca always did have impeccable timing," Jake muttered. "So the kiss . . . ?"

Kai paused at a red light as a bolt of lightning pierced the sky in the distance. "That was all her." It was. Just because his body and mind disjoined for an instant didn't mean anything. In the end, he'd pushed her away. That's what counted. Right? "I'd agreed to meet her because I needed to move on. I think she did it just to fuck with me."

"That definitely sounds like her."

"So what do I do? Renee isn't taking my calls, and I don't know where she lives, other than off campus." Just then, Kai spotted the sign for Lost Apple Books. Art would have her address. Maybe he'd give it to him?

"The Kai I know never gave up easily. Fuck, that's probably why you're still alive."

"Jake." Kai pulled into the bookstore parking lot and eased into the nearest handicapped spot as the first spattering of raindrops fell with loud splats on his windshield.

"It's true. If you really like this girl, you can't let Becca of all people fuck it up for you. Go after her."

The rain increased in fury, and Kai twisted, reaching behind the passenger's seat for his poncho. He didn't feel like getting soaked, especially since it made the leather of his braces stink, and it took forever for the padding to dry.

"The things you want the most in life are never easy," Jake said, half joking.

Kai sighed, finding the balled up poncho and sitting up again. "Life is never easy."

The woman was already sitting in one of the armchairs by the window of Nancy's cafe, cradling a mug of something hot, pausing briefly to blow the steam off before taking a sip. Although Jon had never seen her before, he knew it was her: yellow blouse, chin-length dirty-blond hair, just as she'd described. He debated getting a coffee, but the triple espresso Ben had treated him to still hummed in his veins, and he was hoping to keep this short and sweet.

Jon pulled his hand through his hair and approached, offering what he hoped was a smile. "Megan Younger?"

She smiled, set her mug aside—tea, he could see now, the string and tag of the bag dangling off to one side—and rose. "Dr. Taylor." She gestured for him to sit.

She was pretty, he supposed, in that bubbly, school teacher kind of way, and she apparently talked with her hands even when she wasn't signing, he thought, zoning out as she babbled a bit about herself. It reminded him of Kai. A modest engagement ring twinkled on her left finger, but was bare of any other jewelry. So she was engaged, but not married yet. He supposed she was young, maybe Kai's age, plus or minus a year or two.

"This is the fastest call-to-interview I've ever had in my life," she finally said. Jon had called her an hour ago.

"I don't like to waste time."

She nodded, and seemed to shift her demeanor to mirror Jon's seriousness. "How old is your child?"

"My brother. He's an adult, but we were separated a long time and I didn't really keep up with my sign language." Jon observed how she nodded politely as he spoke, occasionally taking

sips of her tea. “I understand a little. Especially if he signs slowly, but most of the time I’m just extrapolating meaning from his facial expressions and the few signs I do know rather than really knowing what he’s saying. And my signing is terrible, as he likes to remind me. Often.”

She chuckled. She was cute, Jon realized. In a little-sister kind of way. Maybe working with her wouldn’t be so bad. “Sounds like you want to increase your vocab, comprehension, and fluency. We can meet a few times a week—”

“Every day.”

“Pardon?” She raised her eyebrows reflexively, as if the integration of her facial expressions to language were so ingrained from ASL that they carried over into her English. *Just like Kai*, Jon thought.

“I’d prefer to meet with you every day if possible. At least during the week.”

She nodded, twisting her engagement ring absently as she considered, lips pursed. “I can manage that. An hour every day. We’ll work on your conversation skills. ASL immersion. I’ll give you a sheet of vocab at the end of each Friday that we’ll prioritize for the next week.” She smiled sweetly. “We’ll get you functionally fluent in no time.”

Kai sank into his car, tearing off his poncho and tossing it angrily into the passenger’s seat. Frustration radiated off him in waves, and he gripped the steering wheel tightly, though he didn’t start the car. The rain continued to pound and splatter, echoing the blood pulsing in his ears. Art had refused to give him Renee’s address, suggesting Kai return tomorrow, when she was working, if he wanted to talk to her.

The logical part of Kai’s brain knew it was Art respecting Renee’s privacy as he’d respected Kai’s (by not telling Renee the details of Kai’s past), but the rest of him raged. He felt completely out of control, anxious. The hot humidity in the stale car became stifling, and Kai found he was breathing harder, shoulders working. He punched the key in the ignition and turned, adjusting the fans for some circulation. His fingers tingled. He felt like he was suffocating, like his skin was crawling with hundreds of tiny ants.

What the fuck was wrong with him?

He’d finally gotten the shadow of Becca off his shoulders, and once he got to talk to Renee, she’d understand. But why did he feel like he’d thrown everything away? With Becca, with Nikki, with Renee. Why did this overwhelming feeling of *aloneness* grip him, turn his stomach and make him want to tear off his skin?

His hands were shaking. *Shaking*. His chest tight, heart racing, head fuzzy, like he’d just gotten an epi injection. He pinched the band on his wrist, snapped it. *Snap. Snap. Snap*. Each pull more desperate to snap himself out of whatever the hell was happening to him. After maybe a dozen of these—he honestly wasn’t sure, his mind was too messed up to bother counting—the band broke.

“Motherfucker,” Kai swore. The past few weeks, the band had helped the anxiety, and so he never went without one, replacing them immediately whenever one broke. He tore open his glove compartment, hand blindly searching. He had to have one in here. “Shit.”

Kai jerked his hand back, noting a thin line of blood along the tip of his middle finger. He stared at the blood for a moment, squeezing it out with his thumb, his heart rate soaring. He dove back into the glove compartment until he found the source of his injury—a paint scraper he’d bought when he’d gotten the car, which he’d used to take off the myriad parking permits and bumper stickers left over from the previous owner. It was obviously sharper than he’d imagined, as his finger began to throb pleasantly.

A flare of panic filled him, and he quickly threw the scraper back into the compartment, placing his hands on the steering wheel, as if to ground himself. His breaths came in harsh gasps now, and his vision tunneled. He closed his eyes, tried to calm himself, but it didn’t work. He’d peek them open, glance at the glovebox, fingers tingling, itching to take the blade to his skin.

He needed to go. Somewhere. Home, maybe. Sit in the cold shower. Maybe take some Valium. He never liked to take it if his muscles weren't spasming, but fuck, he needed to get out of his head somehow. He felt like a part of himself were crawling around, trapped in his skull, scratching desperately for escape.

Diane pushed the apartment door open, shaking her head. She was drenched—having been caught in the downpour not once, but twice, and a headache was forming behind her eyes. She wanted to grab a glass of wine, sink into the tub, and just soak for an hour.

The smell of burnt food immediately assaulted her nostrils, and she dumped her damp bag at the door, jogging into the kitchen, her wet jeans sticking to her legs and leaving a dripping trail behind her. As she drew closer, she heard faint sobbing and sniffing, and peeking over the half-wall that divided the kitchen from their small living room, she saw Renee, sunk into a chair, practically crying into a bowl of . . . something.

The scent of overcooked food and charred spices was heavy, along with the faintest remnants of smoke, and dirty dishes and pots covered the counters and filled the sink.

Renee seemed to notice Diane and sniffled, wiping her nose with the back of her wrist, managing to spread some kind of gunk on her cheek in the process. Her hair, pulled up in a loose ponytail, was spattered with what might have been flour, frizzy from the humidity, making her look like some kind of bride of Frankenstein wannabe. It was enough to make Diane laugh, but she bit her lip. Renee only cooked—or attempted to, anyway—when she was really upset. “I tried to make gumbo,” Renee muttered, looking around the disaster of the kitchen as if for the first time.

Diane grabbed a bunch of paper towels, wet the end, and offered them to Renee. “What happened?”

Renee just shook her head, bubbling into more sobs, so Diane stepped forward and took the paper towels, cleaning her friend's face.

“Class with Blondie didn't go so well.”

Renee sniffled and her eyes met Diane's, but she didn't say anything.

Diane sighed. “Let me guess: the kiss was a mistake. He got caught up in the moment and he just wants to be friends.”

Renee pulled a piece of the paper towel out of Diane's hands and blew her nose, shaking her head.

“Oh, God. He wants to be fuck buddies, no strings.” Diane's fist balled. She didn't care if this guy was a linebacker. She'd beat the fuck out of him if she saw him. Renee had been through enough jerks.

Renee took in a deep breath, seeming to get herself under control. “It's not like that,” she said, biting her lip. She explained how happy Kai had seemed to see her, how he'd invited her to talk after classes, how her heart had soared with possibility. How then Becca, his *girlfriend*, the one Renee had suspected he'd had all along, had showed.

“He kissed her, right in front of me,” Renee moaned, starting to break down again.

Diane pulled her into a quick hug. “He kissed her, or she kissed him?” Diane leaned back to study Renee's face.

Renee's dark brows knit, her mind working. “I . . . I'm not sure. It happened so fast, and I was so upset, I took off.” She nibbled her lip. “But he must have kissed her. I mean, she's his girlfriend, isn't she?”

“Sounds to me like an ex, from your story,” Diane said sincerely. “Have you talked to him?”

Renee shook her head. “He's been calling me all afternoon, but I just . . . I just couldn't. I couldn't hear lies or excuses.”

Diane squeezed her shoulder. “I could talk to him.”

“No,” Renee said immediately.

Diane nodded, and decided to rise and start loading the dishwasher. “Then find out what he has to say in class on Monday. That way you can look in his eyes and see if he’s giving you a line about what happened. Go from there.”

Renee sighed. Maybe Diane was right; maybe she’d overreacted. But part of her was still hurt and angry for what she saw as a betrayal despite the limited status of their relationship. And part of her reveled in the confirmation that Kai really was out of her league.

Diane laughed. “Or maybe he just goes around kissing all the girls he knows. Why bother with a handshake when you can shake tongues?”

Even though Kai had to concentrate hard on the road to make it to his apartment as the rain grew blindingly heavy, his mind still hadn’t settled. He sat in the parking lot, in his reserved space, still feeling that invisible gnawing. The pain in his finger had faded, and his eyes drifted to the glove box.

His hand moved to the latch, almost as if of its own volition, pulling it open. He held his breath. His stomach felt tied in a huge knot, and it was a very real possibility he’d lose his lunch. Or his mind.

No. He’d already lost that, he thought, pulling the scraper out and clutching it in his hand.

He could go for a swim. Or lift weights, or jack off. Something. Anything else. The rain grew louder, a crack of thunder piercing the pounding against the roof of the car. But Kai knew none of those things would help. Only pulling metal through flesh would quiet the storm raging inside him.

He was foolish and stupid to think he could attempt school, that he could have any semblance of a relationship. He could be used. He could fuck. And that was it. Not that it mattered, because his MLS was spiking—the latest attacks only the beginning, he knew from experience—and any delusions he had that the transplant had cured his FS were fading after his visit with Dr. J that morning.

How could Renee want him? Really want him? Once she learned the truth, she’d run. Just like Becca. Becca, who he’d thought understood, who he believed had loved him. Who obviously never did, he realized, thumb testing the blade of the scraper. If she had, why hadn’t she answered him this afternoon?

Just one cut, he thought, lifting his shirt and bringing the blade to his bare skin. He grazed the edge along his side, toward his ribs, feeling the threat of the cut as his chest expanded with each breath. Lightning flashed in his peripheral vision and he pressed harder, dragging the blade through his skin along the curve of his ribs, keeping it shallow. The complaint didn’t hit him immediately; not until the crash of the thunder did the sweet, simple pain begin to throb. He closed his eyes, focusing on it.

This was pain he could control.

After a moment, it faded to a dull ache, and over the next few minutes, he found himself making several slices along his sides and stomach, trying to stay in that blissful place outside himself, enveloped by the sensation of the cuts as long as possible.

But it didn’t last. Even though, because of the placement of the gashes, each breath irritated them, skin pulling and shifting with each inhalation, the restlessness, the uncomfortable itch in his brain, remained. Tossing the bloody scraper aside, he reversed out of the spot so quickly he nearly rammed into an oncoming car, the blare of their horn echoing long after he’d pulled out of the complex.

Nikki woke to the incessant pounding. At first, brain still heavy with sleep, she thought it might be her neighbors, who apparently believed tossing heavy objects around the apartment was the best kind of foreplay. Soon, she realized it was knocking, coming from her door. A flutter of panic hit her. Mark. He’d showed up at the diner a couple nights ago. Clyde had scared him off,

but what if he'd followed her home? Nikki sat on the edge of the bed, trying to ignore the person at her door. Maybe if they thought she wasn't home, they'd go away. Whoever it was.

The sound shifted, as if the person had stopped using their fist and were now slamming their palm against the door instead. The rhythm skipping, as if they were tired, but not willing to give up yet.

Soon, a voice accompanied the sound. Panicked, desperate, calling her name.

Kai's voice.

Nikki had never heard Kai sound like that, and it sent a shiver of worry up her spine. She dashed to the door, double-checking the peephole before opening for him.

Kai's clothes were damp, and he was leaning heavily on the doorframe, his breath ragged, his face pale and . . . crazed. It was a look Nikki remembered from her brief time on the streets, and it terrified her.

"I saw your car. I hoped . . ."

Nikki reluctantly stepped back, warily watching Kai as he limped to her bed, collapsing blindly on it without unlocking his leg.

Nikki hurriedly locked the door, keeping her distance, worry mixed with the hint of fear. Maybe it was just thinking about Mark, but seeing Kai like this made her nervous. Before she could ask why he was here or what the hell was going on, he spoke.

"Kiss me," he said. It wasn't a command, but not quite a plea, either, his tone strange, like the rest of his behavior. He reached for her, and she approached, still cautious. "Please."

As soon as she drew close enough, he pulled her onto his lap and devoured her in a hungry, greedy kiss, his hands clinging to her as if she were his lifeline. She opened for him, letting his tongue probe her mouth. Remembering the night after the party, when he'd fucked her with animalistic desperation. With that recollection, his behavior suddenly seemed more familiar. Had the girl, the one he said he was leaving Nikki for, rejected him? Was that what this was?

He nipped at her lips, encouraging her to bite him back, and she could almost feel the pain emanating off him. Gripping one of his shoulders, she slid her other hand under his shirt, and her fingers met unexpected resistance, dampness. The wrong viscosity for sweat or rain. She pulled back, lifted the fabric, and gasped. Half a dozen long gashes along his side and stomach, some oozing, marred his skin.

"Jesus. You're bleeding!" She pulled his shirt farther up, seeing more marks. "What the fuck?" she demanded, nearly falling off his lap. "What happened?"

"Nothing," Kai said resolutely, yanking the fabric back down.

"Dammit, Kai. This isn't nothing." He didn't resist when she moved to examine the marks again. "Some of these are deep." Nikki shifted to rise; she needed to get stuff to clean those wounds. Hopefully none would need stitches. But Kai grabbed her wrists, his grip painful. Nikki struggled, trying to pull away, panic flaring instinctively, fighting him though she knew she had no chance if he wasn't willing. "Let go," she said in a strangled voice, her eyes wide. Kai shook his head, as if he hadn't realized how firmly he was holding her, releasing her immediately.

Her heart was still pounding in her throat, but before she could move or act further, Kai dissolved, covering his face, mumbling unintelligibly—she wasn't sure he was even trying to make words—his chest heaving, his breath quickly turning into wheezes. She saw he was biting the heel of his hand, hard, and the terror of earlier quickly surged. Kai was definitely a headcase, but this . . . this was different.

She managed to pull his hands from his face, grabbing his cheeks so she could study his eyes. It seemed crazy, but was her boy next door strung out? For the first time, she got a good look at his face—his eyes were bloodshot, dark circles beneath them, several days' worth of stubble coating his cheeks—and he looked exhausted.

"When was the last time you slept?"

His eyes were unfocused as he responded. “More than a couple hours?” A hollow, eerie laugh escaped his lips. “Days.” He shuddered, and he looked ready to break down again.

Hesitantly, she eased off his lap, nervous about leaving him alone, but something told her he wasn’t going anywhere. A few minutes later, she returned with a couple pills and a bottle of water, offering them to him insistently.

The panic attack—if that’s what this was—hadn’t completely subsided, and he studied the pills in her hand warily, his shoulders rising and falling in quick, forced breaths.

“Xanax,” she said. “Don’t ask where I got them, just take them.”

At first, she thought his breathing was getting worse, but then she realized he was shaking, his whole body trembling. Fuck.

“Take them,” she said, her voice stern.

He shook his head. “I’m fine,” he said, but even his voice was unsteady.

“You’re so far from fucking fine, Kai, you’re in another dimension,” Nikki said, her eyebrows drawing down sternly over her eyes. “Take. The. Fucking. Pills.”

He reached with a trembling hand and popped the tablets, swallowing them dry, defiantly. Then he wrapped his arms around himself as if he were cold, dropping his head and saying nothing.

She tugged at his shirt, and he let her help him pull it off. He wasn’t exactly calm, but he wasn’t resisting. Then she nudged him back on the bed, and wrapped her arms around him. He was getting blood on her blanket, on her clothes, but she’d worry about that later as he rolled into her embrace, sobbing into her chest. She smoothed his hair, mystified; the meds should only take a few minutes to work. She knew he took Valium occasionally for his muscles and hoped he didn’t have too high a resistance. He needed the calming effect of the drug, and perhaps some sleep, too. Plus, it would give her a chance to treat his cuts.

After a few minutes, his body relaxed, and his breathing grew quieter, slower. *Thank God*, she thought, rolling him off her. It gave her a chance to finally fully see the damage etched into his flesh. Some of the smaller cuts had already begun to scab, but the others still wept a sheen of blood. Dammit.

She spent the next thirty minutes tending to his gashes and pulling off the rest of his clothes. His pants weren’t really wet, and neither were his braces, she was relieved to find, not particularly wanting her apartment to smell like soaked leather. She folded up his jeans, and his wallet tumbled out of the pocket, spilling business cards on the floor. Glancing over to make sure he was still asleep, she scooped them up.

As she prepared to shove them back into his wallet, she noticed the name on the first—Dr. Angela Miller, psychiatry—and frowned. Then she caught another doctor’s name. Dr. Jon Taylor, pulmonology. On the back, written in Kai’s slanted lettering was another number, likely his brother’s cell. She studied Kai, whose nose twitched subtly in his sleep, debating about calling. She didn’t know exactly what was going on, but she was willing to bet those cuts didn’t come from Kai taking a shortcut through a rosebush. Finally, she settled for entering the number into her cell and stretching out alongside Kai to watch him sleep.

The rain had stopped thirty minutes ago, although thunder still rumbled in the distance and the sky remained dark and threatening as Jon made his way over the boggy ground of the cemetery. Tombstones glistened with rainwater, and bouquets of dying flowers lay soggy on some of the graves. In the distance, he saw the end of a funeral, the majority of the mourners heading back toward their cars, and Jon forced himself to look away, heading up a small slope toward the familiar spot.

He smoothed his hand over the granite, sinking down to his knee, ignoring the dampness seeping into his pant leg. He studied the inscription,

Bryan Taylor, b. 1948. | Ann Taylor, b. 1951.

*d. 30 September 1984.
No farewell words were spoken, no time to say goodbye,
you were gone before we knew it, and only God knows why.*

It was ridiculously sentimental, but fitting, even if Jon wasn't entirely sure he believed in God. He'd purchased the headstone a couple years ago, replacing the cheap plaques that had marked their graves for years. Not that it mattered, he supposed. They were dead. Not even much of their physical bodies remained. But he'd done it, partially because, in the back of his mind, he'd been imagining the stone he'd get for Kai if it came to it, trying to warm himself up for the terrible task he was wearily certain would come to pass. It would be easier to select his brother's marker, he'd thought, if he'd already done it for their parents.

"I don't know what I'm doing here," Jon said, sinking down to both knees. "It's not like you can hear me." He sighed, pulled his fingers through his hair, glanced over his shoulder as the final mourners abandoned the coffin, slowly being lowered into the ground.

"I'm worried about Kai," Jon said, then laughed subtly. "I know you'd probably accuse me of constantly worrying about him." Jon frowned. The storm had brought a front, dropping the temperature nearly twenty degrees. A gust of wind blew, making Jon shiver. "I can't lose him now," he said, nearly pleading. His hands bunched into tight fists.

"I always used to know what to do for him. But this . . ." Jon swallowed, collapsing down onto his legs. "I hated you for so many years, Dad, for not doing more for Mom. For not preventing her from. . . . But I understand now, how you must have felt. Fuck," Jon said, exasperated. He closed his eyes, ignored the cool wind that reminded him of Kai's birthday.

Though it had been the height of summer, when temperatures were normally in the 90s, it had been unseasonably cool, a fierce, cold wind blowing as if winter were trying to come months early. It had felt almost like an omen, when Jon had climbed on his bicycle to head to the library, where he'd planned to spend hours absorbing as many books as he could. But the unexpected chill had sent him peddling back home after only a few blocks so he could retrieve a jacket.

Thank God he had.

The memory always seemed to move in slow motion. Jon's bike, discarded in the front yard, his hand on the door, calling out to his mother about the jacket as he jogged for the closet. But when she didn't answer, the innate worrier in him had searched the house until he found her.

Sprawled on the kitchen floor, blood oozing fresh from her wrists, the kitchen knife she'd used lying nearby. It was a scene no seven-year-old should ever have to see, an image that still haunted him sometimes when he shut his eyes.

Not yet eight months pregnant, both Ann and Kai had nearly died that day, an emergency C-section and life support managing to keep Jon's premature baby brother alive, although, at the time, the prognosis wasn't good. Both mother and son had spent months recovering, while Jon had struggled desperately to understand.

Jon had never been able to look at his mother the same after that, and it was years before the nightmares faded. Maybe their mother's suicide attempt was the reason Jon had always clung so closely to Kai. Maybe that day was the reason Jon never ignored his anxious intuition.

Jon shook his head, trying to clear the vivid memory—the truth of which Kai was entirely ignorant of—rubbing his eyes with his forearm before rising to his feet. Jon glanced over at the new grave, now covered with a mound of fresh dirt.

"I *won't* lose him now."

Nikki woke a few minutes before Kai, giving her some time to admire him as he slept. The drugs had worked, lulling him into a deep, seemingly dreamless sleep, his body relaxed. When his eyes finally opened, it was slowly, and she saw the haze of the drug lingering in his pupils.

She offered a faint smile, smoothed his hair. “I cleaned you up while you were out,” she said.

Kai touched his side, as if he’d forgotten, and his forehead wrinkled momentarily. It could have been in confusion, it could have been pain, before he pressed the heel of his hand into his eyes, as if to help himself wake up.

“Feel better?”

Kai sighed, rolled onto his back and pushed himself up. He seemed disoriented, unsettled. It could be the Xanax, Nikki knew, or it could be whatever had made him wig out still lingered. “I don’t know,” he finally admitted.

Nikki nodded, sat up, curling her legs to her side so she could observe him as he folded his legs, hugging them close to his body and resting his chin on his knees. “What happened?” she asked gently, a palm draped on the bridge of his foot.

“Nothing. Everything. Fuck.” He shut his eyes for half a minute before opening them again. “I don’t know.” He frowned, his mouth taunt as if he’d sucked on a particularly sour lemon. “My doctor doesn’t know what’s wrong with my lungs. I’m pretty sure I’m heading toward a bad period for my legs.” Kai’s eyes darted at Nikki momentarily before he added, “And . . . Becca. I met with her this afternoon. Everything went to shit, and . . .” Kai’s voice evaporated.

Nikki waited a moment for him to continue before realizing he was done. She was still trying to formulate what to say when Kai spoke again.

“Sometimes . . .” Nikki noted he hugged himself tighter, but otherwise was perfectly still. “It’s like this fog comes over me, and . . .” He swallowed. “I try to fight it. I workout or I eat pie or I fuck, but . . .” His breath hitched. “I just had to let it out.” He looked at her, his eyes round, deep blue, pleading, hoping she understood. She’d never seen him look so . . . lost before.

Taking a chance, Nikki smoothed her fingers absently over the top of her phoenix tattoo. “When I was a kid . . . I went through some bad shit,” she admitted vaguely, focusing on the intricacies of the design inked into her skin so she wouldn’t have to meet his eyes. “I ran away when I was fifteen and try not to look back, but . . .” She sighed, shrugged weakly. The silence that followed her admission—she’d never talked about her past, not really, not to anyone, even vaguely—made Nikki’s stomach clench. But she’d already spoken the words; she couldn’t take them back now.

When she looked up, she saw Kai was staring off into the distance, clutching his knees so tightly to his chest the cords stood out in his forearms. “I was ten,” he said, barely a whisper, as if speaking to himself. “It was only a few months, and most of the time, I can forget. . . . Pretend.” He swallowed thickly, and for a moment, Nikki saw that scared ten-year-old boy again in the shadow of the large man sitting huddled beside her on the bed. “But then *this* happens, and I wonder.” He relaxed subtly, turning toward her. He took a deep, shuddering breath. “Thanks. For everything.”

Nikki shrugged, offered a faint smile. “Perfectly fucked up, remember?”

September 9, 2000

Kai sat huddled on the bed, his legs tucked up, arms wrapped around them, resting his chin on his knees and desperately trying to make himself disappear. He shivered violently, though he wasn't cold despite the thin T-shirt and briefs he wore, and he clutched his legs harder, trying to still his body. His heart thundered loudly in his ears.

A loud crash off to his side—metal hitting sheetrock—made Kai hunch reflexively, although the thrown crutch was several feet away and in no real danger of hitting him as it clattered to the floor.

The woman—his “aunt”—who'd thrown it was muttering, only a few words loud enough for Kai to make out. “. . . Fucking retard . . . not worth . . . monthly check.” She hurled the second crutch, and though Kai tried not to shirk, he did, his heart leaping into his throat. His T-shirt clung to his back with sweat. “Disgusting. . .”

Tears tracked down Kai's face as she turned toward him. She'd picked up one of the crutches and was wielding it like a bat. She'd never hit him, but then she'd never been this angry before. She was still hurling insults at him, yelling at him to stop crying. He released one arm from its death grip on his legs just long enough to sign, “*I'm sorry*,” over and over again on his chest.

“Stop with the fucking—” she waved her hands in the air in mock imitation. “You know I don't know or care what the fuck you're saying.”

Kai nodded and returned his grip to his legs. His left foot had started spasming terribly, and he tried to shift it under the edge of the bunched up blankets, hoping she wouldn't see it.

“You're too fucking quiet,” she murmured, slapping the stick of the crutch against the other palm. “I had thought that was a bonus. Turns out it's annoying as fuck. I wonder if I hit you with this, if you'd scream?”

Kai's eyes widened, but he squeezed his legs tighter, burying his face in his knees. The spasms had traveled up into his left calf now.

“I don't feed you and you still throw up,” she said, disgusted. “And on my fucking shoes.” Kai felt her draw closer, and he trembled again, holding his legs to keep his left from jerking too visibly, desperately trying to shrink into the mattress. “On. My. Fuck. Ing. Shoes,” she repeated, louder and slower this time, the way she usually spoke when talking directly to him, as if he couldn't understand her otherwise. Kai was used to that. Because he didn't talk and often struggled to walk, most people assumed he wasn't all there.

He was sorry. So sorry. He hadn't meant to throw up. It had just happened. His “aunt” refused to let him eat more than scraps unless he would ask—out loud—for food. But eating so little meant his stomach complained when he tried to fill it. He sobbed harder into his legs. Trembling all over. He'd never made her this mad before.

“Stop. Crying.” She clanged his crutches together.

He jumped in surprise, his arms falling from their grip. Unrestrained, his left leg's spasms became blatant, his right foot joining in. He had to struggle not to cry harder, to take calm, deep breaths, to be *good*. Instead, his breathing was jagged, wheezy, panicked, and he tried to pull his legs back, but they didn't want to bend, and it hurt so much. His heart was beating so fast he could barely hear over the sound of it thundering in his ears.

“Jesus,” she said, anger and disgust dripping from her words. After a moment of staring at him as he struggled to hide his spasms beneath the bedclothes, she added, “You're paying for those shoes.” She pointed the crutches at him, now, and he wondered if being hit with them would hurt more than his legs or his persistently empty stomach or the bruises from the falls he'd taken often since coming here. It was all his fault, he knew. If he'd been good, his legs

wouldn't twitch and he wouldn't have trouble walking and he wouldn't throw up, no matter how sick he felt.

He cringed, bracing himself for the impact. But it never came.

"I can't stand to look at you anymore." Kai risked a tentative glance up, and saw his "aunt" had tucked his crutches under her arm. "Fuck. Up. My. Coffee. Tomorrow. And. I. Break. These." She grunted and headed for the door. "And if they fucking take you away, good fucking riddance."

The door slammed shut violently, and the sound immediately set Kai's entire body shaking again. She'd taken his crutches, which wasn't a new punishment, but she'd never threatened to get rid of him before.

Now he was alone, and that terrified him more than the shouting, the pain in his still-spasming leg or the bruises or from the cuts in his thighs where his braces had dug in, or the threat of being hit, or the roll of his uneasy, empty stomach. First, his mother and father had abandoned him. Then his siblings—even Jon, who he'd thought would never leave him. Then, the people at County House had sent him away, too. If this "aunt" decided she wanted him gone because he wasn't good enough—though he tried so hard to be—what would happen to him? Where would he go?

Kai clenched his eyes tightly, more tears seeping out, his breathing ragged, his body overwhelmed with trembling that had nothing to do with his MLS. He shifted onto his side, struggling into as close to a fetal position as his legs would allow. He had no more tears, so he slid a hand to his thigh, fingers digging into one of the particularly bad sores. The pain was fierce and immediate, coursing through his leg like fire chasing across a room. But it pulled him away from the bed and the woman and the terror of what would happen when she decided she didn't want him anymore, either.

Kai woke suddenly, gasping. He struggled to push himself up, his head swimming, his back and hips resisting the movement. His skin was slick with sweat, his hair damp and clinging to his head as if he'd just stepped out of the shower. His pulse raced, and his shoulders heaved with each breath, fighting for air.

The deep fear of his ten-year-old self from his nightmare permeated his body, the panic pulling at him even stronger than it had with the buried-alive dreams of the past week. No matter how hard he worked his chest, he couldn't seem to fill his new lungs, and that lent its own level of terror.

He struggled to suck in air, his stomach jerking, a faint wheeze echoing on his breath as he reached for his inhaler. Two puffs, as his breathing grew harsher, shallower, faster, desperate. Kai's terror surged, still fueled by the dream and the horribly familiar feeling of not getting enough air.

He took two more puffs, leaning forward despite his muscles' complaint, straining with every fiber for as much oxygen as he could muster. The attack seemed to be getting worse, not better, his vision darkening on the edges. His fingers gripped the sheets tightly. A drop of sweat caught and snaked down along his spine. He shivered, still pushing himself to fight, to stay conscious. The medicine would work soon.

His chest burned from the exertion and the barely beginning to heal cuts, and he clenched his eyes closed, focusing. Several panicked minutes passed, but finally Kai felt the vice in his chest relaxing, and he was able to take slower, fuller breaths. He ached everywhere, he was drenched in sweat, still trembling from the adrenaline wearing off, but he was breathing. He was OK.

His shaking hands roamed his body, feeling for his sternal scar, for the old marks on his thighs at the same time his eyes surveyed the dim room. He could see the outline of his wheelchair near the bed, and the faint glint of his crutches propped up along the wall, longer and without the

pins of the sticks in his nightmare. It reassured him he was back in reality, in 2000 and not 1988.

Kai couldn't remember the last time he'd felt that viscerally terrified before. Sure, there was always an element of fear when he couldn't breathe, even though he'd been battling it his entire life. But this was different. For a few fleeting, fearful minutes, Kai had *been* that terrified ten-year-old again, a boy he hadn't thought of in nearly a decade, whom he thought he'd buried deep in the recesses of recollection.

Still catching his breath, Kai shifted so he could lean his aching back against the wall, his eyes sliding shut. His chest hummed with residual pain from exertion and the cuts, a hand smoothing his left thigh. That leg was stiff, so much so that if he could trust his knee not to give out randomly when his muscles decided they were done being taunt, he wouldn't even need his brace.

He could still feel his heartbeat pulsing in his throat, and he shut his eyes, though he knew sleep wouldn't find him again tonight.

“Spill.”

Nikki jumped, but didn't stop what she was doing.

“You've been cleaning that same patch of counter for the last five minutes. What's going on?” Marge leaned on the surface, staring at Nikki. Nikki could feel it, even though her eyes were cast downward.

After a few minutes, she straightened, glancing around. It wasn't quite five AM, almost time for shift change, so the diner was quiet and empty except for a regular in the back corner booth nursing his coffee. Nikki sighed heavily, but said nothing.

“If it's that creep Mark you're worried about, it's OK. Clyde threatened to chop off his dick with a cleaver if he ever came back.”

Nikki managed a faint smile.

Marge's eyebrows knit, and she folded her thick arms over her chest. “So if that's not what's bothering you, what's wrong?”

Nikki shook her head, traced a fingernail into a crack in the counter, gazing out through the dark windows across the diner. “You ever been in love, Marge?”

Marge let out a barking laugh. “Once.”

“What happened?” Nikki asked, resisting the urge to go back to wiping the counter.

Marge sighed and snatched the rag away from Nikki. “He was sent overseas. Never came back.”

Nikki studied Marge's face, but couldn't read it. “He was a soldier?”

Marge nodded. “It was a long time ago.” She smiled faintly, as if recalling a pleasant memory despite everything.

Nikki nodded and turned to snag the coffee. She could at least refill the regular's cup. Maybe convince Marge to let her work an extra half-shift. She could use the money and the distraction. Nikki felt Marge's hand on her shoulder, and she stiffened for a moment, carafe in hand, coffee sloshing against the sides.

“When are you going to tell Blondie how you feel about him?” Marge asked, her voice soft.

Nikki's breath caught and she looked up at Marge's eyes, saw the knowing glint in them.

“Refills,” Nikki said quickly, gesturing with the carafe and ducking away. But her heart was pounding against her chest.

Kai had left her not long after waking up, once he was convinced the drugs were out of his system enough to manage the short drive to his apartment. Nikki had needed to let him go; she was working the graveyard and had to leave anyway, but the look in his eyes had haunted her all night, even though they'd been pretty busy with travelers and drunks and kids just looking for a late burger. It was a look she recognized, one she'd seen in her own eyes often enough when she was younger, and not something she'd ever expected to see in Kai's blue irises.

As terrifying as it was, all she wanted was to cradle Kai in her arms and hold him until that look went away, to kiss each self-inflicted wound, to fuck him until she lived up to her sign language nickname and help him forget.

Renee hadn't expected to be angry when she woke up that morning. The night before, she'd cried until she'd run out of tears, then cried some more when her body restocked. She'd woken up with a tear hangover, her head stuffy and heavy, and instead of feeling better, she'd felt worse. Angry at Kai, at herself, for being such an idiot and being sucked in again by a handsome face and a luscious kiss. She already knew he was good at masking his emotions; it wouldn't be a stretch for someone like that to be a good actor, too.

The happiness he'd supposedly displayed when he saw her yesterday morning could have been feigned. Maybe he even set things up so she'd witness the kiss. Maybe Diane was right, and the other girl—Becca?—had been an ex, and Kai had just been using Renee as a rebound—at best—or as a tool to make Becca jealous so they could get back together.

Renee took her anger out on a stack of boxes she was going through in the storage room, letting out a loud grunt. The tape on the bottom of the box she held split, spilling the contents onto the floor. A quick, reflexive hop was all that kept them from crushing her tiny feet.

"Shit," she said, sinking to her knees to gather up the books, praying none had gotten damaged. Only her second Saturday on the job and she was already messing things up. She had to stop thinking about Kai. After all, he'd given up calling her after she'd refused to answer yesterday afternoon. If he couldn't even be bothered to keep trying her cell, how likely was it that she (or their kiss) had meant anything to him?

"Ms. Poche, there's a customer out front who needs your assistance."

Renee dipped her head momentarily to mask the fierce blush that spread across her face. "Yes, sir."

Art chuckled. "I told you: call me Art. And it's OK. I keep telling that company they don't use the right tape on their boxes. I'll get that. You go on up front. He's waiting for you near the mystery section."

Renee nodded, pushed herself to her feet and dusted off her knees, striding past Art and back into the store proper. She struggled to compose herself. Her first few days on the job, she'd mostly been getting her feet wet, doing inventory, working in the background. Occasionally ringing up a customer or two on Art's ancient cash register that seemed to rely more on brute strength to operate than anything else. But this was her first real opportunity to work with a customer, one on one, and especially after the box failure in the storage room, she wanted to do well.

Plastering on her best smile, she strode confidently toward the front of the store. The mystery section occupied an L-shaped niche near where the old part of the building met the addition, and a small table and two wingchairs were set amongst the shelves to give patrons a chance to sit while they perused the wares. Big-box stores kept seating to a minimum; you didn't want to risk the customer reading without buying, but like everything Art did, his philosophy was different.

Her smile faded instantly when she saw the customer, long legs stretched out, blond head leaned back, eyes closed, a paperback in his lap as if it were a prop. Her anger immediately tried to flare up, but he hadn't yet noticed her, so she took the opportunity to study him. He looked even more tired and haggard than yesterday, his stubble darker and more visible, the bags beneath his eyes deeper. Clearly, he hadn't slept.

A flutter of hope tried to surface: maybe his insomnia had to do with guilt or worry over hurting her? The fact that he was here, bright and early on a Saturday, clearly to see her, rather than waiting until Monday, had to mean something, right? She swallowed. Got herself under control again. What had premature excitement done for her yesterday? Better to hold onto the anger and be happily surprised, rather than bitterly crushed.

Again.

She cleared her throat a couple times, and he stirred with a jerk, waking suddenly. Apparently, he'd fallen asleep. He blinked a few times, as if trying to fully shake off sleep, but he still seemed weary, a little groggy. He didn't try to stand; instead, he gestured for her to take the other seat.

She resisted at first, finally settling on the edge of the cushion, primed to leave. She didn't want him to think she was comfortable. He needed to see she was hurt and angry. "Can I help you?" she asked, voice crisp.

Kai sighed, rubbed his eyes. "I'm sorry, Re," he said, his voice dry and soft.

She frowned, but said nothing else. Inside, she was screaming. She wanted to lean forward and kiss him again, but she forced herself to stay rigid, formal.

He formed his lips into what could have been a pained smile, then nodded. "Probably doesn't mean much. Fair enough."

"So explain. Five minutes. I have to get back to work." A part of Renee cringed inwardly at the cool tone of her words, the harshness of the time limit, but she forced herself to keep her course.

Kai coughed, used his hands to push himself up a bit so he wasn't reclining. "Uh, this'll take more than five minutes."

Renee glared at him, not making things easy.

He nodded, rubbed his leg absently. "Could I meet you . . ." He paused, his eyes sliding shut, his hands closing over one thigh and trying to massage the muscle. Either he was mentally reviewing his calendar, his nervous tic had expanded as he grew more anxious, or his leg hurt. Renee frowned.

"Tonight? After work?" he said finally, stilling his hands and reopening his eyes.

He wanted to meet, to talk to her the way they were supposed to have yesterday. She wanted to say yes, again she craved another kiss, but she held it in. "Sort of did that already. Who's going to kiss you this time?" The bitterness of her words surprised her, but she realized, from the fierce pang in her stomach, that she meant them.

Kai sucked in a breath through his nose. "Probably deserved that." His shoulders drooped and he leaned back in the chair, looking somehow even more exhausted than before. "Becca and I dated a long time." He hesitated, found her eyes, and she saw his were open, honest, but weary. "She wasn't who I thought she was. She's selfish and manipulative. She knew I . . . liked you, and she wanted to screw with me."

Renee's anger melted a bit, but even though Kai's eyes told her he was telling the truth, she'd been burned already, and knew she should be cautious. "So that kiss . . . ?"

Kai shook his head. "I told her I didn't want to see or talk to her again. I'm sorry." Kai pushed himself to his feet with effort, and offered a semblance of a smile. "Tonight, nine o'clock. The sandwich shop again. I'll answer any questions you may have."

Dr. Miller pushed the door that led to the waiting room opened with one hand, juggling her cellphone and coffee mug in the other. She was surprised to see a tall blond man struggling in the door from the hallway, leaning heavily on a pair of forearm crutches. He kept one leg straight, and seemed to be using his upper body to pull himself forward. It was awkward, yet obviously practiced.

"Mr. Fox? I was just getting ready to call you," she said, waving her cell phone.

He looked at her, his face an unreadable mask except for a slight frown and crease of his brow. "I'm sorry I'm a little late. I haven't been moving real fast today." He nudged a chin toward where his hands gripped the crutches and shifted his weight.

Dr. Miller blinked, then caught herself and smiled. "Of course. My office is just through here."

She held the door open for him, and as he squeezed past, his eyes met hers briefly in a look even her years of training and experience couldn't quite determine. She knew very little

about him, since the appointment had been set up with such short notice. He'd mentioned he'd had a double-lung transplant a year ago, that he had some other health issues, and that he'd been "shrunk" before—to use his words. Other than that, she was going into this pretty blind. She knew he'd be a challenge, but she wondered if perhaps he'd be a harder shell to crack than even she had anticipated.

"Thanks," he said, then added quickly, "for squeezing me in."

Her brows furrowed, but she smiled and nodded, opening the second door, this one to her office, and walking around to hold this one for him as well. "Take a seat wherever's comfortable," she directed him.

Once they were inside her office, she left her coffee mug on a side table near the chair where she usually sat during sessions, then crossed to her desk. She left her phone in a drawer, grabbed a pad and pen, and looked up at Kai, who had settled into the large couch, his crutches propped against one of the arms, one long leg stretched out, the other bent. He had his eyes closed, but his face was devoid of any discernible emotion.

She took a moment to study him. Deep purple bags marked his pale skin beneath each eye, and several days' worth of stubble coated his cheeks, creeping onto his neck. His body seemed stiff and yet sagged into the couch, and he absently massaged one palm with the thumb of the opposite hand.

He had some faint bruising on the inside elbow of one arm, and he wore a rubber band on his left wrist. His arms were muscled and lightly freckled, but the loose, overly large polo he wore masked the rest of his body. Objectively, he was handsome and attractive, but it seemed evident he didn't consider himself as such. Despite his best attempts to mask his emotions, he struck her as weary and filled with doubt. Or perhaps that was just her intuition.

"Can I get you something to drink? Coffee?"

His eyes fluttered open drowsily, and he wiped a hand on his cheek. "No. Thank you."

She nodded and took her seat, crossing her legs at the ankle and holding the pad in her lap. Smiling, she said, "It's probably already obvious, but I'm Dr. Miller. Why don't we start by you telling me what brought you in today?"

Kai let out a faint laugh, scratching under his nose with one finger. "It's still kind of hard for me to believe I'm here of my own volition."

"You mentioned you'd seen therapists before." Dr. Miller said in her carefully cultured neutral tone. She knew psychiatric treatment was pretty standard for the first months after transplant surgery, but preferred not to assume and let Kai's response speak for itself.

Kai held out a hand and started counting off on his fingers. "When I was six, when I was ten, off and on during high school. Before and after my transplant." He dropped his hands and shrugged.

That explained something, at least. It was clear Kai was experienced with how counselors worked, and was likely—if his manipulation of his body language and facial expressions was any indication—very good at revealing only what he wanted. Or rather, only what he knew the therapist wanted.

Interesting.

"So what changed this time? You seemed pretty upset when I spoke to you yesterday."

Dr. Miller didn't normally see patients on Saturdays, but after hearing Kai's panicked voice on the line yesterday, she'd made an exception. It seemed hard to reconcile the harried man she'd talked to the day before with the stoic one sitting on her couch.

Kai's placid mask slipped for a moment, and he fingered the edge of his shirt. Then he brought his left wrist to his right, slipping fingers under the rubber band there.

Interesting.

"I don't like to pressure my patients," Dr. Miller said carefully, "but you called me. You showed up. I can't help you if you don't talk to me."

Kai swallowed, nodded. His eyes drifted around the room, finally fixing on her framed diploma that hung over her desk. “Can I ask you something first?”

Dr. Miller nodded. “You can ask anything you like, and unless it’s inappropriate or not relevant to your therapy, I’ll answer it.”

Her eyes went to his wrist, where he began absently snapping the rubber band against it with the fingers of his right hand. “If you have a patient who tells you—hypothetically—that they’ve been thinking of taking their own life, or hurting themselves, how would you react?” Interesting.

She shifted in her seat, her eyes fixed on him, but keeping her posture and face non-threatening, welcoming. “If they’re serious about suicide, I’d want them to let themselves go on a 72-hour hold, for their protection. It’d also give us a chance to help them through the crisis safely.”

Kai nodded and flicked the rubber band a little harder.

“As far as self harm goes, if I’m certain the patient doesn’t have suicide as their intent, I’d likely encourage them to call me whenever the urge became overwhelming, and increase the frequency of our sessions while we worked to figure out why they have these feelings and ways in which they can address their issues without physically hurting themselves.”

Kai pursed his lips and nodded again. After a moment, he took in a deep breath, then pulled up the hem of his shirt. Dr. Miller saw the end of his sternal scar from his transplant, but what drew her eye were the bandages and gauze that covered large patches of his abdomen. After a few seconds, he dropped his shirt again, and he didn’t meet her eyes when he spoke.

“That’s why I’m here,” he said, his voice quiet. His entire demeanor seemed to have changed, his shoulders a little droopier, his body language suggesting shame and embarrassment, bracing himself for harsh judgment.

“You did this yesterday?” Dr. Miller asked, scribbling some notes on her pad but trying her best to keep her eyes on him as much as possible.

Kai inhaled sharply, then nodded.

“Would you like to talk about it?”

Kai lifted his head, looking a little surprised, before dipping it to mask his face. He reached back and cradled his neck, not saying anything.

“When you’re talking to me, I want you to consider it a safe space, OK? I won’t judge you for what you say or do. I want you to feel comfortable being open and honest with me so I can do my best to help you get through whatever it is you’re dealing with.”

Kai looked up at her, obviously skeptical.

Dr. Miller stifled a sigh, slipped on an easy smile. “I don’t know what your other counselors were like,” she said softly, “but I’m here for *you*. I’m not going to try to force you to tell me anything you don’t want to, and I’m not here to criticize you or trick you or manipulate you. I’d like to help you.”

Kai’s eyes drifted away, and she saw him shifting back into the faux calm of the beginning of the session, shutting down. This was going to be more difficult than she’d thought.

“This wasn’t the first time you’d harmed yourself,” Dr. Miller said, trying a different tactic, offering him an easy yes or no response. She normally preferred to keep her questions more open-ended, less guided, but different patients required different strategies, and at least until they could establish a comfortable rapport, it was likely Kai would keep her on her toes. Kai took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. Finally, he shook his head.

“Before yesterday, how long had it been?” Dr. Miller dropped her hands on the pad, leaning back in her chair, doing her best to seem non-threatening, more like a friend and less like a doctor, hoping it might prompt Kai to be more forward.

Kai started to flick the rubber band against his wrist again, but stopped himself. “Since before I got really sick, before my transplant,” he said, his voice small, his shoulders hunched, again, as if bracing for chastisement.

Again, interesting.

“How long ago was that, do you think?”

Kai leaned back on the couch, closing his eyes. His fingers toyed with the rubber band, but he didn't flick it against his skin. “More than a year. Eighteen months, maybe. At least.” He shook his head. “The last few months leading up to my transplant are a little fuzzy in my memory, to be honest.” He smiled, but it was more of a wince than anything else. So he wasn't nearly as well adjusted to the transplant as the previous psych must have been lead to believe. Interesting.

Kai pressed the heel of his hands into his brows, as if trying to push away a headache. “But I've wanted to. Lots of times.”

Dr. Miller nodded. “Is that what the rubber band is for?”

Kai froze, then glanced at his wrist as if seeing it for the first time. “Yeah,” he finally responded in a quiet voice.

“It's good that you've tried to channel a less harmful way of dealing with things, but ideally I'd like to see if we can get to the heart of why you hurt yourself so that maybe we can work together to stop it entirely.”

Kai's fingers curled on his jeans as if gripping something beneath the fabric. “I'm fucked up,” he said, and when he looked up, she saw the skepticism in his face. He didn't believe she could help him. No, that wasn't right.

He didn't believe he *could* be helped.

She pushed away the reflexive frown. “Why do you say that?”

He shrugged, and there went the mask again.

It felt like fishing. You bait the hook, lower it into the water, get a few tentative nibbles, occasionally a bite. But half the time when you reeled it in, there was nothing, and you were back to square one. All she could do was keep trying different baits and exercise her patience.

“Why don't you tell me a little bit about yourself?”

Kai blinked at her, but otherwise, his expression was unreadable.

“Normally, I have patients fill out paperwork, forward me any medical files they feel might help their therapy, that kind of thing, before our first session.”

Kai nodded, as if understanding, and took a deep breath. “What do you want to know?” There was a hint of challenge in his tone.

“I suppose anything you think might be relevant to your therapy. Anything you think might help me help you.”

He grunted, and his fingers toyed with the rubber band on his wrist, but otherwise, he said nothing, his face revealed nothing. Jesus. She was going to have to go with specific, directed questions if she wanted to pry anything out of him, apparently.

“OK. Why don't you tell me about your family?”

He stared at her a long while, and his mouth opened as if to speak, but then he seemed to think better of it and began to fidget, flicking the rubber band against his wrist, his eyes searching the room as if for an escape.

Interesting.

She gave him space, not pressing him to answer.

Finally, his face soured, and he looked at her. “My instinct is to respond sardonically, but that wouldn't be ‘conducive to my therapy,’” he responded, ending in a mocking tone, as if regurgitating something he'd been told before—likely more than once. Before she could speak, he apologized. “I'm sorry. I—I have to remind myself I'm not being forced into this.”

“No. Like I said before, I'm not here to trick you into telling me anything you aren't comfortable sharing.” *But if even a little question like “Tell me about your family” wires your mouth shut, this isn't going to be easy.*

Kai's face changed again. It was unreadable, though this time it didn't seem to be an intentionally feigned neutral mask; it was simply too complex to parse out its exact meaning. It was possible this kid would give her ulcers, but damn, he was fascinating.

"My parents were killed in an auto accident when I was a little kid. My siblings and I were separated. I grew up in the system."

Ah. "Foster homes?"

Kai laughed, but there was no mirth in it. "Kids like me aren't fostered. Or, at least we weren't. Things are changing, now, apparently." He shrugged.

Dr. Miller couldn't suppress a frown.

He flicked the rubberband hard against his wrist. "First, they separate boys from girls. You start in a group home, then they foster you out. If you're like me, then you got sent to Calhoun County House for Crippled, Diseased, and Feeble-Minded Children. Or just County House." He tilted his head. "And you stay there, until you die, or age out and are either on your own or sent to an institution for adults."

Dr. Miller shifted in her seat, studying him. His face had slipped back to his mask, but his body language spoke differently. A tension in his shoulders, and the snapping of the band had become almost a nervous tic.

"So you never lived with a foster family?"

Kai's eyes blinked rapidly, and he looked away. "Like I said. County House kids weren't fostered. Except in rare situations, and that was usually for the money, since the state paid extra for us, because of our 'special needs.'"

Dr. Miller observed Kai's breathing had increased, and his hands were trembling. "Kai," she spoke softly to him, but he didn't seem to hear her. He closed his eyes, shook his head, as his breathing grew rougher, harsher, more frantic. "Kai."

She stood just as he pulled an inhaler out of his pocket and hurriedly took a couple puffs after managing a moderate deep breath between each. The trembling hadn't abated; in fact, it had spread, and his breathing sounded worse. Calmly, she crossed to her desk, removed a paper lunch bag from a stack she kept in one drawer, then took a seat on the couch beside him, making sure to give him a cushion's worth of space.

She opened the bag, twisted the top, then pushed it into his hand. "Breathe into this for a little while. It'll help."

He looked at her doubtfully for a minute, his shoulders jerking with the effort of keeping up with the quick, short breaths, but he obeyed.

After a few minutes, he relaxed, dropping his hand to his knees. His breathing had calmed, but tension still hovered in the air.

"How long have you been having panic attacks?"

Kai hesitated a moment, then finally pushed himself away from his knees. A fleeting grimace crossed his face, like his back was stiff, and he sank back into the couch, looking more tired and defeated than when he'd first come in. "I used to have them sometimes when I was younger. When my parents first died. When I was . . . ten. Lately, it's only been a few days. Almost always after a nightmare."

Dr. Miller nodded, put out her hand. He placed the crumpled up bag into it, and she rose, returning to her seat across from him. "Tell me about these nightmares."

"They started a few days ago. Every night."

Dr. Miller observed Kai's right leg bouncing nervously. Restlessness, panic attacks. Some kind of anxiety disorder? Or maybe PTSD? The recent anxiety attack had been triggered by talking about the environment in which he grew up, and nightmares were often associated with posttraumatic stress. If she had more time with him, that might lead to something. But no. It wasn't a nervous gesture. His leg was spasming. Apparently, it wasn't enough for him to reveal that he noticed, and the braces he was wearing under his pants—she'd seen hints of them leading out of his pant legs—must have been keeping the spasms from getting too wild.

He saw her staring at his leg, and he braced it with his hands, calming it a bit. “They do that. It’s worse when I’m stressed. I haven’t slept in days.”

She nodded. From what little she’d learned about Kai in the last hour, she could tell he had been through a lot of life and knew, generally, how to handle himself. Maybe not always in the healthiest ways—as the rubber band and the cuts on his abdomen testified—but there were a lot worse ways to deal with trauma and stress than that.

“Until last night, I’d dream I was buried alive. Literally. Not in a coffin. Just in the ground. And I can feel and taste the dirt in my mouth and my nose. And I can’t breathe. It’s dark, and I can’t breathe, and I’m trying to climb out, but no matter how hard I struggle, I don’t seem to get any closer to getting free. And I wake up, struggling for air.”

Dr. Miller jotted a few things on her pad, particularly noting how Kai had started in past tense, then shifted to present. How his breathing had increased again as he spoke. “It’s OK, Kai,” she spoke softly, “you’re safe here. Try to relax.”

Kai nodded, closed his eyes, and took a few steady deep breaths.

“So, last night you had a different nightmare?”

Kai’s entire body stiffened, and she could hear him swallow. He nodded once.

“Want to talk about it?”

There was a long pause. “No. Not—not today.”

Dr. Miller scribbled a note to remind herself to probe him about it at their next meeting. “OK. Yesterday, when you called—”

“It was kind of like a panic attack that wouldn’t go away,” Kai said in a small voice.

“Did the cutting help?”

“At first,” Kai admitted. “But then the pain faded, and I felt even worse.”

“And so you called me.”

Kai nodded.

Dr. Miller tapped her pen on the pad for a moment, thinking. “Do you take any medication for your spasms?” Normally, she’d have a full medical history sheet, including medications, allergies, etc., but there hadn’t been time for that.

“Valium, mostly.”

“Regularly?”

He shook his head. He seemed to have given up trying to mask his emotions, and now looked tired and, honestly, a little scared. No, that wasn’t right. It was more the look on a person’s face after they’ve been through a frightening or traumatizing event, like they’d just seen their house burn down and were standing in the street, huddled in a blanket, trying to process that all their worldly possessions were gone, and that they’d just barely escaped with their life.

“I don’t like to take it. It doesn’t help that much. Mostly makes me groggy.”

“I want you to take half your normal dose if you feel a panic attack coming on. It should help. Then take one-and-a-half your normal dose at night to help you sleep. We’ll try that for a few days and try something else if that isn’t working.”

He nodded and grabbed his crutches.

“I’d like to see you again. Soon. Monday?”

“Tuesday? Morning?”

Dr. Miller rose and checked the large calendar she kept on her desk, where she kept track of her appointments. “I have an opening at ten.”

Kai nodded, then carefully pushed himself to his feet. He looked ready to fall over at any moment from sheer exhaustion.

“Call me if you feel the urge to hurt yourself before we see each other again, or if you desperately need to talk to someone. OK?”

Nikki opened the door, surprised to see Kai, leaning heavily on his crutches. When he looked up at her, she saw a deep crease in his forehead, his lips pressed tightly together. His breathing was

quick and shallow, though she could see he made the effort to control it. His smile was pained and forced, his eyes a deep, glossy blue.

"Can I come in?"

Nikki nodded, studying him as she stepped aside, holding the door open for him. She noticed he moved stiffly, with effort, pulling his legs along primarily with the strength of his upper body, his legs straight and stubborn. He said nothing as he maneuvered to her bed, sinking down with a barely masked grimace. She watched as he unlocked each knee, his hands working the joints to relax.

"I have work in a few hours," Nikki said, watching as he bent awkwardly to undo each shoe.

"I know," he replied, seemingly with effort.

Nikki had known Kai casually for years, intimately for months. She'd seen him in all kinds of moods, wearing an assortment of masks, but it was rare for him to offer a raw glimpse of who he really was. Yesterday had been a scary sample into Kai's obviously damaged psyche. Today—though it was clear he worked to hide it—she saw something else.

Pain.

She knew, vaguely, that Kai's muscles were unpredictable; she'd even witnessed minor spasms before, his foot or leg jerking against his will. She'd seen him stiff, grumpy. But this was more than that.

Nikki frowned and crossed to help him remove his jeans. It was obvious he was holding his breath for long stretches of time, like a swimmer, surfacing for air only when he absolutely had to. He couldn't keep the mask up as she helped strip off his pants, grimacing.

"Kai, maybe this isn't a good idea."

"I need to get them off," he said, his voice strained, already working to undo the straps on his thighs before Nikki had even gotten his pants completely off. His legs were unyielding, his feet twitching subtly.

She nodded, tossed his pants aside and focused on freeing his lower legs. After a few minutes, Kai lifted each leg from its brace, massaging the back of his knees, focusing on where the tendons stretched from muscle to joint. Nikki heard him hiss more than once as she gathered his braces and crutches, setting them aside but near enough for him to reach. When she returned to the bed, he'd pulled himself back, not bothering to remove his brace socks, underwear, or T-shirt. His eyes were shut, his lips pursed, his breathing ragged, recovering. The pain had to be bad if he couldn't hide it. But she didn't understand: why was he here?

She carefully crawled onto the bed from the opposite side, stretching out alongside him, observing the way his jaw worked as he clenched his teeth, the faint wrinkles around his eyes he was too young to have, the movement of his eyeballs beneath the lids. Nikki reached for his hand and linked her fingers in his. He didn't squeeze it, but he didn't pull away, either.

"Kai."

He opened his eyes halfway, but she could see the glaze of pain there.

"What's going on." It wasn't a question, Nikki's face soft with concern.

"Just my MLS," Kai attempted to say casually, but his voice was stilted and his lids slid shut again.

"I mean, if you're hurting this bad," Nikki said, not even bothering to sugarcoat, "why didn't you just go home?"

"Needed to see you." Kai attempted a smile. Then he shifted, groaning, his hands going to his thighs. He turned his head toward her, but said nothing further.

"Kai." Nikki frowned, even though he couldn't see it.

"I don't have anyone." He took a few careful deep breaths.

Nikki eased closer and smoothed her hand over his face. "You have your brother."

He swallowed, shook his head subtly. "He doesn't know me. He thinks he does."

"And I do?" Nikki couldn't hide the note of skepticism in her voice.

Kai didn't respond immediately. Instead, he sucked in a breath, pushed himself up and back so he was sitting with the wall supporting his back. (Nikki didn't have a headboard.) His face was still lined with pain, but either it had subsided slightly or he had recovered enough to partially mask it again.

Finally, he spoke, his voice quiet, "I'm not afraid when I'm with you."

Nikki's mouth twitched, and she studied his eyes, though he kept his vision focused off into space. Her heart raced in her chest, anxiety tickling the tiny hairs on her arm. In some ways, moments like these were more terrifying than even his mental break the day before. "*When are you going to tell Blondie how you feel about him?*" Marge had asked her earlier. Nikki swallowed hard.

"Afraid of what?" Nikki asked hesitantly, stalling.

Kai shook his head just enough to suggest the gesture, then beckoned her closer. "Sometimes I think you're the only friend I have. How fucked up am I?" Kai's voice broke, he grimaced and swallowed hard, kneading fingers into his left thigh.

Nikki crawled closer, so their faces were near, the whisper of each others' breath echoing off their lips. She studied his eyes, multifaceted and beautiful as ever, yet atypically unguarded. She could say *something*, as frightening as it was. Right now. She didn't know what had happened with the other girl, but Kai had come back to Nikki, more than once, and not just for sex. For comfort. No one had ever turned to Nikki for anything other than coffee or a quick fuck before. It just wasn't who she was.

"*I'm not afraid when I'm with you,*" Kai had said without explanation. He wasn't afraid. But she was. So she leaned in, kissing him. Hesitantly, chastely, before pulling back just enough to speak. "Can I do anything? Make you feel better?" She smoothed a hand over his crotch, but he didn't respond as he normally would. Finally, he pushed her hand away and wrapped it in his. With his other, he pulled her close, kissing her again. Deeper. But tenderly, without his usual hunger or desperation. It felt wonderful, but the fearful confusion destroyed her pleasure.

Nikki pulled back, checking his eyes again. "Do you have medicine with you you can take?"

Kai pulled his fingers through her hair. "Yes. But then I can't drive. And you have work soon."

"So? I'll drive you home, then take the bus."

Kai frowned.

Nikki sighed, planted a few kisses on the edge of his lips. "You've been too tired to fuck me. Or too upset. But we did anyway. You've never been hurting so bad you *couldn't*."

Kai's smile was faint, yet present, perplexing. "My pants pocket. There's a pill case."

Nikki fished the case out of Kai's jeans, then grabbed him a bottled water from the fridge. He was finally rolling off his brace socks, fingers working into the muscles of his thigh and around his knee. Once he'd freed his legs, he massaged his calves, and Nikki could see the muscles jumping beneath his skin, making his foot and toes twitch painfully. He was doing the swimmer thing again, holding his breath as long as he could.

Seeing him like this was unnerving, not only because he'd never allowed her to before, but because she felt helpless. Even the box in her palm, which rattled as she moved, seemed a vain attempt to help.

"It's going to get worse," she found herself saying as she handed him the box and water. "Even with those."

Kai opened the pill case, plucked two tablets out, and swallowed them quickly, offering a faint nod. "This is the beginning," he said. His face was gray, his eyes weary. He grimaced, and grabbed his left thigh.

"Then why did you come here?" Nikki asked again, sinking down beside him, surprised by the anguish in her voice. "I can't help you."

Kai shook his head, then gave up on his legs, lying back with an audible groan. He beckoned Nikki to him, then pulled her close to his body. "You've always seen me for what I am." She noticed he said "what," not "who," but let him continue. "You put up with my shit. You didn't panic when I stopped breathing. Or freak when I came in here yesterday acting like a junkie coming down from a bad high, cut up and trembling." His sentences were fragmented as he talked through his pain. He sucked in a shuddering breath. "And . . . you're always there when I wake up."

Nikki blinked, processing. For a long moment, they lay together in silence before she turned in his embrace, trying to study his face. He had his teeth clenched and was making an effort to breathe through his nose quietly, but she could hear subtle, barely audible grunts that were likely in tune with spasms she couldn't see.

"As opposed to Becca," Nikki finally said.

Kai groaned, but she wasn't entirely sure if it was from pain or in response. "No." He sighed, grunted. "OK. Yes. But that's not what I was trying to say." His grip on her loosened. "Can it just be enough I wanted to be with you? Just for a little while?"

She felt him hold his breath, then let out a barely strangled moan, followed by panting. Despite the medicine, his pain was obviously worsening. "Lay here a while, then I'll take you home," Nikki whispered, embracing him and planting a few stray kisses wherever she could. "You have to breathe for me, OK? In and out, slow and deep." Nikki stroked his arm, then his side, before remembering the cuts and shifting lower. The muscles in his hip and thigh were tense, and she could occasionally feel one jump beneath her touch. Kai tried to obey, focusing on his breathing, and soon he'd drifted into a restless, drug-induced sleep. She knew he wouldn't be out long, so she clung to him, inhaling his scent, her mind racing.

"I'm glad you came to me," she whispered against him. It was the closest to three words she could manage out loud, even if he couldn't hear her.

Nikki had dozed off, too, at some point, because she woke suddenly to the unexpected sound of someone screaming in agony. It took her a moment to get her bearings, to realize the harsh, barely human cries of pain were coming from Kai.

He still lay—if the word could be used—beside her on the bed, his body contorted, his muscles jumping, pulling his limbs in a dyssynchronous, macabre dance, obviously entirely out of his control.

"Kai? Can you hear me?"

His eyes were tightly shut, tears streaming from them, his hair plastered to his face with sweat. He opened them, and his breath was shallow, panting. "Yes." His voice was a rasp, stolen by pain and screams.

"What can I do to help?"

Now that he knew she was awake, he seemed to be making some effort to contain his cries, or perhaps he was trying to save his voice. She couldn't tell. She saw his jaw work, and she looked down. His legs were still twitching discordantly, but the spasms seemed to stay there and had subsided a bit.

"Bad like this. Waves," he said, spitting out the words with effort.

Her brows knit as she watched him carefully push himself into a semblance of a sitting position, his face going chalk-white with pain as he moved, and she rushed to help him. He didn't have the energy to shrug her off, panting from pain and effort for several minutes.

"It comes and goes in waves," he said, finally, when he had his breath. His voice was still hoarse, still tinged with pain. He let his head fall back against the wall with a loud thunk, his fingers digging into his thighs, his chest rising and falling with effort and the occasional hitch, his face scrunching up in response to a spasm Nikki couldn't necessarily see. His body had stilled, for the most part, the worst seemingly over. But more was coming.

"What do you want me to do?"

He breathed harshly for several minutes, then wiped his face with the side of one arm, blinked a few times. "Drive me home."

She stared at him. "Kai." Then at the front door, which was maybe fifteen feet away, but might as well have been fifteen miles. She was strong for her size, but there was no way she could carry Kai even a couple feet, let alone all the way to his car.

"I'll manage," he said, his hands testing each leg before pushing himself to the edge of the bed with a pained grunt. Wearing only boxers, he didn't bother with his pants, braces, or shoes, simply angled his legs as well as his muscles would allow, slipped his arms into his crutches, planted them carefully, and heaved himself to his feet.

He wavered, any remaining blood drained from his face, but he didn't fall. "Don't have much time," he said between strained breaths. She quickly gathered the rest of their stuff, including Kai's clothes, shoes, and braces, and jogged toward the door. She wanted to be sure it was open, and the car, too, by the time he made it. He was making his way toward her, using a modified swing-through gait and focusing as much weight onto his arms and crutches as he could.

It was harder for him once he was out of the apartment, his legs looking less secure and his arms beginning to tremble. She wasn't sure if it was fatigue, pain, or the resurgence of spasms—perhaps a combination of them all—but she didn't waste time getting the car door open so he could fall into the seat, where he continued to tremble. She hurried to shove his stuff in the back, and she heard a hurling sound, then the splash of liquid on concrete, followed by a groan.

Nikki hurriedly crawled into the driver's seat, because it was faster than rushing around to Kai's side of the car. She could see his legs had started to twitch again, and he was reclined in the seat, looking piqued and drained. He barely blinked. She could smell vomit faintly on his breath, and the vacant, distant look in his eyes terrified her as she leaned over to make sure his door was shut before she started the car.

"Kai?" she asked hesitantly as she backed out of the spot.

"M 'K," he managed to say, followed by a groan.

She could hear his ragged breathing, his muted moans, the subtle sound of his legs as they moved against his will. She tried to talk to him, but either the pain was too much for him to speak, or she was losing him.

"Kai?" she asked him again at the first red light. His entire body was trembling, and his eyes were half-lidded. He'd quieted, and that worried her more than anything. "Kai?"

She lifted his eyelid, and noticed his eyes were drawn back in his head. Panic flared. He was breathing, quick and shallow, like a hyperventilating puppy. She grabbed his wrist, and her stomach clenched when she felt nothing. She took a few breaths. She was a waitress, not a nurse; just because she hadn't felt anything didn't mean. . . . A few horns began to honk behind her, but she ignored them, checking his neck now.

She definitely felt something, but it wasn't the regular rhythm she expected. It was weak. Fast, but barely palpable. She pressed harder, and she didn't get the expected resistance. This was definitely out of her paygrade. Cars moved around her at speed, honking, but she ignored them, fishing her phone out of her purse and hurriedly dialing Jon as she raced toward the hospital.

Jon rubbed his eyes and tried to focus. He was tired, and focusing on the complicated grant paperwork he was attempting to work on wasn't going so well. Maybe it was time for him to go home. He needed to talk to Kai, and since Jon had patients in the morning, it might be his only opportunity in the near future. He had begun saving and shutting down his computer when his phone rang.

He stopped before he finished going through the motions that would safely and securely turn off his computer to check his phone. By the time he got to it, the ring had cut out. The number was unfamiliar. He wasn't on-call, and he wasn't on-call for the fellows, either. Besides,

they normally would have paged him. He dismissed it as a wrong number, returned his phone to his belt, and finished up with his computer. While he waited, he decided to check his blood sugar. It might not be a bad idea for him to eat something before he headed home. Though he felt all right, it'd been several hours since he'd eaten.

His phone rang again while his computer shut off and he waited for his glucose monitor to register. It was the same number, but he managed to somehow drop the phone before he could answer, and he missed the call a second time. He really needed to upgrade to one of those phones that you could set different ringtones to different numbers. It'd make things a little easier. At least he'd know immediately, without having to even check the screen, when Kai was calling, for example.

His sugar was low, not dangerously so, but enough he needed to eat pretty soon. He checked his watch, and decided he'd grab something from the cafeteria quickly. He snagged a syringe from his minifridge, checked the cap, and slipped it in his pocket, then slung his briefcase over his shoulder.

He was locking his office door when his phone rang again. Jon sighed and unclipped his phone from his belt. The same number again. Maybe it was Kai? Calling from a friend's? He answered with his customary greeting, his voice slightly lower than normal.

"Dr. Taylor."

"Jon? Kai's brother?" The female voice was unfamiliar, wavering. Nervous.

Jon swallowed hard and began walking toward the elevators, then thought better of it, and bee-lined toward the stairs, instead. "Yes. Who is this?" Years of practice helped him keep his voice level, though his heart thudded in his throat.

"Nikki. I'm . . . a friend of Kai's," she said, as if she were pulling the words out. That couldn't be good.

Jon sucked in a breath. "Yes."

"Kai's MLS hit him bad this afternoon. He passed out while I was taking him home. Something wasn't . . . right. So I brought him here. To the hospital. They took him to ICU, fifth floor. I'm going to go wait, but I'm not sure if they'll tell me anything. They're probably going to call you, but I had your number from Kai, and—"

"It's OK. Thank you," Jon said in his practiced calm tone. "I'll meet you there in a few minutes." He hung up, and caught himself on the wall beside the stairway, bracing himself, taking slow, measured breaths. He could break down later, once he had all the facts. No point in panicking or worrying yet. It wouldn't do anyone any good.

The ICU waiting room was mostly empty when Jon arrived, minutes later. A young woman in a rumpled robin's egg blue uniform dress sat cross legged in one of the chairs, bobbing her knee and nibbling on her thumb. She looked tired and nervous and worried, but even so, she was attractive, and Jon could see why his brother liked her.

"Nikki?"

She looked up, flustered at first, but she soon composed herself. "Dr. Taylor?"

Jon nodded.

"You two could be twins," Nikki said as if to herself, rising to her feet and offering Jon her hand.

"Did you hear anything yet?"

Nikki shook her head, and opened her mouth to speak, but her eyes darted over Jon's shoulder, and he turned to follow her gaze.

Kai's neurologist, Dr. Gates, stood in the door, surprising Jon. Perhaps he was the neuro on-call. Or perhaps things were even more serious than Jon imagined.

"Dr. Taylor," the man said, his face serious, offering his hand. They shook quickly. He looked at Nikki, an eyebrow raised, about to speak, probably to ask her to give them privacy, but Jon interjected.

“Dr. Gates, this is Nikki—a friend of Kai’s. She’s the one who brought him in.”

Dr. Gates frowned, but nodded. Then he sighed, focused on Jon. “Kai’s vitals were dangerously unstable when he got here. We started him on fluids, intubated, and treated him with Pavulon to control the spasms—”

“Pavulon?”

Jon sighed and turned to Nikki, who looked apprehensive. “It’s a powerful muscle relaxant. Anesthetic. Used as part of lethal injection in most states.”

“And it’s the only thing Kai responds to when he has this severe of an MLS attack,” Dr. Gates added. “He’s still not stable, so we’re keeping him sedated and monitoring him for now.” He checked his watch. “The effects of the muscle relaxant should last another hour, if we’re lucky. We’ll see how he is and go from there. He may need multiple infusions. We’ll just have to wait and see. I’m hoping, within a day or two, we’ll be able to extubate and bring him up. I don’t want to keep him sedated and in ICU any longer than necessary, especially since he’s immunocompromised.”

Jon nodded. “You think his MLS caused his blood pressure to drop?”

Gates sighed. “I don’t know what caused it. Pain, maybe. It’s one of those one-in-a-million situations, but then Kai’s body is not exactly predictable in the best of times.” A buzz emanated from Gates’ belt, and he checked his pager. “I’ll have someone page you in an hour or so, once I decide whether we need to keep him on the Pavulon or not,” Gates added with a pat to Jon’s shoulder. He hesitated a moment before leaving and studied both their faces. “Kai had some . . . wounds on his chest and abdomen—”

“Cat,” Nikki interjected quickly.

Both Gates and Jon looked at Nikki, eyebrows raised.

Nikki straightened her shoulders. “I got a new cat, and it scratched him.”

Jon knew she was lying—especially since Kai was incredibly allergic to most animals—and he was worried about Kai now more than ever—but he admired the way she defended his brother so unflinchingly. He knew Kai would be grateful.

Gates’ pager buzzed again, and he seemed willing to let it go for now, giving Jon a look that said, *We’ll talk later* before disappearing out the door.

Jon stood for a minute, pulling his fingers through his hair, barely noticing when Nikki stooped to grab her purse and sling it over her shoulder. She looked up at him, a hint of nervousness surrounding her, like an aura.

“I have to get to work,” she said. Then she took in a breath. “If they’re keeping him asleep with drugs, when they stop the drugs, he’ll wake up, right?”

Jon didn’t answer immediately, wondering if he should ask Nikki about Kai’s wounds, but decided it would be a topic better broached with his brother himself. “Basically.”

She nibbled her lip, shifted her bag, then looked up at Jon. “Would you—could you—call me when they’re going to wake him up?”

Jon studied her, his eyes guarded. But he saw in hers a mixture of worry and concern and maybe—even love. It was a look he recognized well; he’d seen it often enough in the mirror in the months before Kai’s transplant. Either Kai had lied to him about the seriousness of his relationship with this girl—which Jon wouldn’t put past his brother—or Kai didn’t realize.

This girl cared about Kai deeply.

“Of course,” Jon said at last.

A look of relief and gratitude swept over the girl’s features, and for the first time, Jon realized she was older than she’d seemed, somewhere between 25 and 30. Perhaps more his contemporary than his brother’s. After what happened with Becca, it made Jon feel a little better to know there was someone besides himself to defend Kai, to worry about him, to want to be there when he woke up.

“Cat, huh,” Jon said as she turned to leave.

She froze for the briefest of moments before shrugging a single shoulder and glancing over at Jon. Then she turned and got close enough Jon could smell her, a mixture of fruit and lust, making his body react in ways totally inappropriate to the current situation.

“Kai’s . . .” she struggled to find a way to express herself. “He feels . . . lost. Alone,” she finally settled for. She stepped back, offered a faint smile. “If you ever come by the diner, coffee’s on me. Pie, too, if you like it as much as Kai.”

Jon watched her go, then forced himself to head down the hall toward Kai’s room.

Diane was curled up on the couch, absently channel surfing when Renee came in. She didn’t need to ask how things had gone; she could tell immediately by her roommate’s body language. She muted the TV, tossed the remote aside, and opened her arms. Renee shuffled across the floor and threw herself into the hug.

“He stood me up,” she muttered. She wasn’t crying, exactly, but her voice was thick, and when she pulled back, Diane could see Renee’s eyes were puffy. She bit back a sigh. “I’m sorry.”

Renee frowned. “It’s OK. You can tell me ‘I told you so.’”

Diane carefully stroked Renee’s hair, avoiding tangling or pulling the curls. “I did tell you so. This guy is gorgeous, right? Beautiful men are trouble. Just ask my mother.”

A shade of a smile stole across Renee’s face.

“The guy kisses you. Disappears. Reappears. Kisses another girl. Begs your forgiveness, but insists he has to ‘explain later,’ then is a no-show. He’s playing you.”

Renee blew out a breath. “I don’t know. You didn’t see him yesterday. Or this morning. I just wonder if something happened.”

Diane let out a snorting laugh. “All part of the act. That’s how he reels you in. So when he shows up later—and he will—all apologetic, with some story about how his pet llama died, and it was given to him by his mother when she was on her deathbed and it’s the only thing he had left to remember her by—you’ll eat it right up.”

“But when you call his phone, it asks you to call his brother if it’s urgent. You don’t think that’s strange?”

Diane shrugged a single shoulder. “Maybe his brother’s in on it. Maybe they fuck the girls together.”

“Jesus, Diane.”

She laughed. “Forget about him. All right? It was a crush, he hurt you, you’re over it, end of story. Moving on.”

Renee nodded weakly. “Moving on.”

Jon spent over half his week treating patients in ICU. Although now that he was no longer a fellow he focused primarily on respiratory patients—FS, severe asthma, emphysema, ARDS—all the critical-care nurses knew him, and he knew them. That didn’t make it any easier to stroll the few feet from the ICU waiting room to the small room where he knew his brother lay.

“Dr. Taylor?” One of them—a young nurse named Alice, not much older than his brother—called out as he passed her station. In this part of ICU, the ratio of nurses to patients was 1:2, with each nurse parked in front of computer screens at a desk directly across from the glass-fronted, doorless cubes that passed for rooms, making it easy for them to rush in and take care of hypercritical patients when necessary. “Dr. Taylor?”

Jon froze; he’d been walking on autopilot, and hadn’t heard her immediately. He turned to her, waiting, his eyes drifting down the hall, where he knew Kai was.

“I didn’t think you were on schedule tonight.”

“I’m not.” Then he glanced down at himself and realized he was still wearing his white coat.

Her brows furrowed. “Kai?”

Jon nodded.

Alice frowned. "Rejection?"

Jon shook his head. "We're not sure what it is right now."

"He'll be fine," she said confidently, with a reassuring smile. Alice was tall but well proportioned, with dirty-blond hair she often teased into curls. She nearly always wore brightly colored and printed scrubs, and despite the environment, was bubbly and friendly. Jon always thought she'd be better off in peds than ICU, but she was good at her job. In fact, one of the better critical-care nurses they had on staff, despite her youth.

"Thanks, Alice."

Alice looked like she was going to say something, but then just smiled and returned to her station. Jon was grateful, walking toward his brother's room in relative silence, for the sounds of the ward filtering in around him: the click of keyboards, the soft whisper of nurses speaking to one another, the hiss of respirators, and beep of monitors all weaving together into a familiar, reassuring hum.

When Jon reached Kai's room, he stopped in the doorway. Despite his experience with ICU patients, despite *knowing* that this situation was different, seeing his brother unconscious, not breathing on his own, made Jon's hands tremble. It wasn't the same room. It wasn't even the same floor. The machines were different. Kai looked different.

Yet Jon couldn't help seeing his brother the way he'd been over a year ago, before the transplant, when things had looked almost hopeless, and Jon had begged, *begged* the God he barely believed in to do something, to bring his brother back to him.

Jon's stomach roiled, and he was barely able to keep himself together as he made his way into the room toward the machines. Maybe if he looked at this clinically, studied the numbers, the settings on the respirator, he could convince himself Kai would be OK. That the worst was behind him. This was just a fluke.

Staring at the mode, the oxygen percentage, and saturation on the respirator's screen didn't change the fact that it wasn't just some patient lying in the bed beside him.

It was Kai. His brother.

Jon forced himself to look. Kai was pale and so, so still. When Jon took his brother's hand, it was cool and clammy, and Jon had to stretch his opposite hand toward the wall and dip his head, measuring his breathing to keep himself calm and his stomach from asserting itself.

After a few minutes, he regained control over his emotions and smoothed a hand over his brother's forehead, trying to ignore the endotracheal and orogastric tubes protruding from Kai's mouth. Then, carefully, he turned back the blanket and lifted Kai's gown. It didn't take long to see a few of the marks Dr. Gates had mentioned. There were so many, Jon thought, but he quickly re-covered his brother. With his blood pressure still low, Kai's body had to work hard enough to maintain basal temperature; Jon didn't want to leave his skin exposed anymore than necessary.

"Dammit, Kai. I'm sorry," Jon whispered, taking up his brother's limp hand again. Even if he could somehow become a sign language savant in the next few days, it wouldn't change anything, Jon thought bitterly.

September 10, 2000

Nikki had moved through her shift on autopilot, pouring coffee, smiling, dishing out orders to the usual Saturday-night truck drivers and drunks that frequented the diner during the graveyard. She hadn't had time to see Kai before she'd left for work, although the truth was, part of her wasn't sure she she'd wanted to see him. Not then, anyway. The worst she'd seen Kai was in the ER after his respiratory attack, and he'd been conscious for most of it. ICU was a whole other ballgame, and she hadn't been certain she could have focused on work if she'd visited him before—even for a few fleeting minutes.

Now that she was heading home, making the short walk from the bus stop to her apartment in the early morning light, she wondered if she should—if she could—go see him. Before Jon called her. Part of her was terrified, told herself she should go home, shower, climb into bed and not crawl out again until it was time for her next shift. But the other part longed to see him again, whatever state he was in, even if he wouldn't know she was there. Somehow, she felt like he might, once he woke, take comfort in the idea that she'd sat with him while he lay unconscious. He'd come to her last night for comfort. If it was all she could offer him, however miniscule, she had to do it.

Jon leaned against the counter of the empty waiting room, pressing the shaking fingers of one hand into his head, which pounded with intensity. His other searched his white coat pockets for a piece of candy, anything to give his blood sugar a temporary boost.

"Jesus Christ, Jon," Vicky's voice called from somewhere nearby.

Jon had to concentrate on staying upright. He'd spent the night with Kai, then come straight downstairs for his Sunday morning clinic. His brain was foggy, though, and he knew, distantly, he'd been behaving stupidly.

He heard a rustling nearby, drawers opening and closing, then warm fingers on his lips, shoving something in his mouth. "Chew." Then arms embraced him and pulled him down into a chair.

As he obeyed, crunching the sweet candy between his teeth, he felt Vicky fumbling through his pockets, a zip, then a moment later, the sharp prick of a lancet. As the glucose from the candy began to hit his blood, his brain cleared a little, though it still pounded with a fierce headache.

A beep, and Vicky swore under her breath. "I haven't seen you like this since before Kai's transplant. Why did you let your blood sugar get so low? For being so smart, you sure do act stupid sometimes." She muttered it all, as if speaking to herself instead of him.

He ignored her, letting himself drift half into sleep as he heard her whispering on the phone.

Seemingly a few seconds later, he blinked his eyes open, feeling less tired, his mind clearer. The clock across the waiting room informed him he must actually have slept in earnest, for an hour had passed. A subtle pain in his hand drew his attention to an IV which stood nearby, dripping clear fluid into his vein.

"I canceled your appointments and started you on a glucose drip," Vicky said, matter-of-factly. "You've been on it long enough your sugar's finally starting to stabilize. You going to tell me what's going on?"

Jon's headache still pulsed faintly behind his eyes, and it took effort to keep them open long enough to study Vicky. She was angry, true, but behind the veil was something else. Concern. "I'm sorry, Vicky. I'm an idiot."

A small smile appeared on her face. "Tell me something I don't know."

Jon took her hand in his. "Kai." He swallowed. His mouth seemed so dry. "S in ICU."

Vicky's lips pursed, and she offered a stiff nod, but didn't push him for more. It was one of the things Jon had always liked about her. "Come on, you can finish that," she said, gesturing to the IV, "reclined in my office. You need the rest and probably could stand someone to keep an eye on you and your levels." She said it clinically enough, but that hint of warmth and concern flickered in her eyes.

Jon nodded and accepted her help as he rose back to his feet, still a little shaky and bone-tired. "Thanks, Vic," he said simply.

"When Kai's out of commission, someone has to look after you," Vicky said with a wink and a quick peck to Jon's cheek.

Jon woke up to silence. He lay, his long form awkwardly sprawled across the small couch in Vicky's office, waking up in the dim light and the shocking quiet. Even with her door closed, the sounds of the clinic—voices, shuffling of feet, phones ringing—always leaked through, but all was still. Even the familiar click of fingers on keys as Vicky worked was gone. Jon focused his attention, and didn't hear vacuums, which meant it was after six, but before nine. Jesus. He'd been asleep hours. No. Today was Sunday. Normally only he and Vicky would be here, plus a few patients. He checked his watch for confirmation: nearly four—he assumed afternoon.

He pushed himself to a seated position, rubbing his hand, now carefully bandaged and the IV removed. He glanced around for Vicky, but he was alone. It seemed unlikely she'd leave him, and spotting the straps of her purse peeking out of a bottom drawer confirmed his suspicion. So where was she?

A minute later, the door opened, and she emerged. Her face was dark and serious, but when she saw him awake, she smiled, transforming her entirely. How had he never noticed before? The way her long hair, cascading around her shoulders, perfectly complimented her delicate features, the way her pale skin had a sort of glow of its own—or maybe it was a trick of the light—her eyes glinting, the smile reaching them.

"Decided to rejoin the world?" she said lightheartedly, but some of the smile's sparkle faded to concern as she fished a small capped syringe out of her pocket, offering it to him. He accepted it without a word, staring at it for a moment.

"Take it. I've been monitoring you all day. Your sugar was dangerously out of control this morning. Any sane woman would have called your doctor, who probably would have admitted you." Her eyebrows raised, and the hint of a smile played in her eyes, though her lips stayed pressed together. "You're welcome."

He nodded, lifted his shirt, pinched the skin, and injected himself. He capped the syringe again and pocketed it, rubbed his eyes, which were a little bleary. "You shouldn't have let me sleep so long," he finally said, speaking for the first time.

She sighed. "You needed it. Besides, I spoke to Alice, who promised to call me if anything happened with Kai. He's fine."

Jon stood suddenly, ignoring the minor dizziness that floated through his head. "He's not fine. If he were fine, he wouldn't be in ICU."

"Jon," Vicky said, approaching, arms stretched toward him.

He held up his hands in reflex, though he didn't fight her when she pushed them aside, his anger melting rapidly as his vision grew blurry. He had to turn and blink his eyes to try to clear it as he felt Vicky pull him into an embrace, her delicate hands warm against him.

"It's OK," Vicky whispered.

"It's not," Jon said, his words surprisingly thick. "I thought he was done with ICU. I thought—" his voice caught.

She whispered calming nothings into his chest until it stopped jerking and they simply held each other in the dim quiet of her office.

"His MLS can't kill him, right?"

Jon sucked in a harsh breath. "Not normally, not at this stage."

“So he’ll be OK.”

“His blood pressure hasn’t been stable. And *that* can kill him.” Jon held her a little tighter. “And if he gets pneumonia?” He finally backed away, shook his head. Despite sleeping most of the day, he felt exhausted, like the gravity in the room had somehow magnified and were pressing down on his shoulders.

Vicky reached up and cupped his face, staring into his eyes for a long moment, a faint smile ghosting her cheek. “Go be with him. But don’t forget to take care of yourself, too.”

It had taken Nikki longer than she’d thought it would to make it to the ICU floor—nearly the entire day to work up the courage, finally deciding to drop in on her way into work. Jon had left her name as one of the acceptable visitors, to her relief, but it still took an effort of will to follow the hall toward Kai’s room. More, to force herself to enter it.

The nurse she’d spoken to—Alice?—had explained a bit of what she should expect, but as with most things, being told something and experiencing it first hand are two vastly different things. The room was small, barely large enough to contain the bed and assortment of machines Nikki couldn’t begin to identify.

Kai lay in the bed, arranged carefully on his side, layered in blankets and buffered by pillows, his right leg carefully elevated and bent. His eyes were taped closed, and tubes protruded out of his mouth, some of them leading up to a hook that kept them out of the way. They were also taped in place, masking part of his face. A blood pressure cuff was wrapped around one arm, and she followed the path of some of the tubes and wires as they led off to the machines and IV pumps scattered around his bed. Other than the unnatural rise and fall of his chest, he was so, so still.

She hardly recognized him, and it wasn’t the fact that she could barely see his face—but rather the eerie way he lay, almost like a mannequin, posed in the bed. Even asleep, he was never perfectly motionless like this. He often slept restlessly, even after sex, and it wasn’t uncommon for his feet or legs to twitch subtly, victims of minor spasms too small to wake him. It was disconcerting, and for a moment, she debated about turning around and leaving.

Finally, she grabbed a chair stuck into the far corner of the room and brought it closer to the bed. It was simultaneously better and worse to see him like this up close, and she couldn’t resist stroking his hair, as if to feel he was really there. After a moment, she sat, and stared at his hands for a long while, not sure if she should disturb them. Like the rest of him, they were posed, carefully arranged on and between pillows, each curled with a small, rolled up towel pushed into them, his fingers cradled around the fabric.

She settled for laying her hand on one of his. His skin was cold and clammy, and she had to fight not to pull away immediately. She didn’t entirely understand what was going on, but if they hadn’t woken him yet, if he was still in ICU, with a machine breathing for him, it couldn’t be good.

She sucked in a breath. “Kai, I know you can’t hear me, but I had to see you. And I promise, as soon as you wake up, I’ll be here.” She swallowed hard, squeezed his hand, and sat for a moment in the still, yet not quiet room, the din of the machines hissing and beeping blurring around her. She wouldn’t—couldn’t stay long, but she’d remain long enough so she could truly say to him later that she’d been there.

Jon reached Kai’s room and paused when he saw a figure beside his brother’s bed. Nikki, again dressed in her work uniform, speaking softly to Kai and stroking his hair. After a moment, she bent and kissed his forehead, before turning to go. Her eyes widened when she saw Jon.

“If you need more time with him, I can come back.”

Nikki shook her head. “No . . . I need to get to work,” she said, dipping her head and smoothing her skirt.

Jon cleared his throat. "Some studies have shown that unconscious patients do sense the presence of their loved ones, and anecdotally, I've—" he cut himself off, shaking his head. Took a breath. "It's good for him that you were here," he finally said in a quiet voice.

Nikki nodded, adjusted her purse, which she clutched against her body. "How long will he be like this?" she asked, risking a glance over her shoulder.

Jon sighed, shook his head. "Until his body is stable without the powerful muscle relaxant."

A moment of relative silence passed between them. Nikki turned to walk past Jon when the stillness was pierced by the harsh blare of an alarm. Jon's heart immediately began to race, leaping into his throat. Jon was used to ICU crises, but this wasn't just some patient. This was Kai.

"What's happening?" Nikki asked, terrified.

A quick glance at the monitor told Jon. "His BP. It's crashing." It surprised him how steady, neutral his voice came out.

A second later, Alice came rushing in, immediately going to work on Kai.

"What's going on?" Jon demanded as he struggled to focus on Alice's movements, but his knees suddenly felt weak, and though the initial alarm had silenced, he could still hear it ringing in his ears.

"Gates was trying to wean Kai off the Pavulon, but now that its effects are waning, his BP's nose dived." She turned to the nest of IV pumps and started to adjust settings. She glanced over her shoulder. "Dr. Taylor, I need you both out of here. Now."

Despite desperately wanting to stay, to help, to do *something*, Jon obeyed, pulling Nikki out toward the nurse's station. For a moment, they both stood there, neither speaking, staring ahead blankly. Jon's heart beat painfully against his chest. Seconds stretched. Breathing was difficult, and he nearly forgot Nikki was there, focused on Kai's room, waiting for Alice to come back out to tell them Kai was fine, that he was OK now.

Instead, a wail of alarms suddenly sounded, reverberating around them like a living, screaming creature. Jon's ears could hardly focus on someone calling a code before the pounding of feet thundered toward them as two more nurses and the attending rushed in.

To Kai's room.

Jon gripped the counter, the world spinning, the alarms and raised voices blurring nearby, their discordant harmony serving to clearly convey one message.

His little brother was dying.

September 12, 2000

Hissing. Beeping. Voices around him. Kai felt . . . off. Disconnected from his body, yet it wasn't entirely unpleasant. He had the bleary impression that he'd been asleep, but not dreaming. Vaguely, he remembered a long stretch of sleepless, nightmare-filled nights, so waking from a dreamless sleep was nice. Maybe that was enough to fill him with the kind of euphoria that made him not really care what was going on right now. Or to bother with the effort to open his eyes. And that definitely was an enormous effort. Maybe he could let himself sink back into sleep. Now that he let himself, he felt weary, a full-body ache seeming to emanate from his bones.

More sleep definitely seemed good. He began drifting again when a sharp, sudden pain hit him. It wasn't enough to make him open his eyes, but it certainly got his attention.

The voices around him suddenly pierced the fog of his mind. "Kai, it's time to wake up."

Kai tried to bat away the unfamiliar voice, but his muscles seemed reluctant to respond. And he had a tube in his mouth. Technically, more than one, he realized. Fuck. The dreamless sleep? Euphoria? He'd recognize Propofol anywhere. He struggled to remember what had happened, but he drew a blank. Another side effect of the anesthetic.

He was poked again, and he would have cursed if he'd been able to, but it did the job, and his eyes opened, if only halfway. The room felt painfully bright, even if part of him knew it really wasn't, and he could make out a few faces. Dr. Gates, his neurologist. Jon. And . . . Nikki.

Kai was vaguely aware of the fact that Gates was speaking to him, but his limited focus was on Nikki, whose face looked sadder and more worried than he'd ever seen it, even though she smiled faintly. She nudged her head toward Gates. Kai let his eyes track toward his doctor, and forced himself to hear what the man was saying.

"You're probably still pretty weak, but could you try to squeeze my fingers?"

Kai's eyelids slid shut, then open again in a gesture too slow to be a blink, and he willed his hand to move. It didn't listen, but his fingers twitched ever so slightly.

"It's OK. It'll take your body a while to recover from the drugs, but hopefully we can at least get that out," he said, pointing to the endotracheal tube Kai was becoming increasingly aware of as the lingering effects of the anesthetic wore off, "and get you moved to a step-down unit."

Kai was understanding Gates on a certain level, yet it still felt vaguely as if his doctor were speaking another language. Gates patted him on the shoulder, spoke in whispers to his brother, then disappeared out of Kai's view. It sucked, not being able to move, not being able to talk, but Kai was almost too tired to care. Keeping his eyes open was becoming more effort than it seemed worth.

He felt Nikki's warm hand on his cheek, and forced himself to look at her. Her eyes seemed wrong, somehow, a shimmer to them he'd never seen before. It confused him, but he chalked it up to the drugs. "They kept you out for a couple days to get your body stable," she said, as if reciting something that had been explained to her more than once. "But you should be OK."

His lids were heavy, but he could see her smiling, and she stooped to kiss his forehead before stepping back to make way for Jon.

"Kai," Jon said, his voice a dry whisper.

Kai forced his eyes to Jon's briefly. His brother looked even more haggard than normal, his eyes bloodshot, dark-gold stubble coating his face. His gray eyes bore a mixture of worry and relief.

"It's good to have you back." Kai's eyes had slid shut again, but he heard Jon take in a harsh breath over all the other sounds of the ICU. "I've taken off the next few days, OK?" He squeezed Kai's hand. "You don't have to go through this alone."

A few hours later, Kai passed his spontaneous breathing test and was extubated, deemed stable enough, and moved to a step-down unit on another floor. Most of the Pavulon's effects had worn off—the reason he could breathe on his own—but he was still weak, a combination of the drugs and the lingering remnants of the severe attack that had put him here in the first place. Pain also hummed through his body, particularly his right leg, his thigh throbbing, vying for his attention.

True to his promise, Jon had stayed with him. Nikki had left not long after he woke, saying she'd return later, but Kai was grateful for his brother. He still didn't understand entirely what was going on, but he knew enough that his MLS had gone rogue, causing Gates to pull out the heavy guns.

"How's your throat?" Jon asked, holding up a cup of ice chips.

"I'll live," Kai responded, his voice hoarse. He tentatively licked his lips, which were dry and slightly chapped, then accepted a few pieces of ice from his brother.

Jon nodded stiffly, and Kai could tell there was something his brother wanted to say, but was holding back.

"Jon."

Jon sighed. "Gates said this attack was the worst he'd ever seen. He wants you on the Mexitil, if only for a few days, until we're sure the attack has passed."

Kai carefully swallowed a bit of ice. "Hence leaving the tube," Kai said slowly, referring to the small feeding tube that snaked out of his mouth, carefully taped to the corner.

Jon hesitated, then offered a brief nod. "Plus, it's possible he may have to dose you with Pavulon again, if things don't continue to get better."

Wonderful, Kai thought, but he said nothing.

"Kai, Gates didn't keep you on such a powerful muscle relaxant as long as he did for fun. Go on the Mexitil for a few days, get over this, and then you can come home."

"How long?" Kai finally managed to ask.

Jon pulled his hand through his hair. "You were in ICU almost three days, Kai. We nearly lost you more than once."

Shit. "I was that bad?"

Jon offered Kai some more ice, nodding. "When Nikki brought you in. . . . You were spasming badly. Your blood pressure was dangerously low. Every time Gates tried to take you off the drugs, you'd crash. We don't know why, but it must be connected to your MLS somehow. It's one reason he's pushing for the Mexitil. In fact, he wants to put you on a cocktail. Strong enough to keep your MLS in check, but weak enough you don't need ventilatory support."

"Strong enough to make me sick and keep me weak."

"Keep you alive," Jon said, his voice tinged with anger.

"You don't know how sick that drug makes me," Kai said. He was losing what little of his voice he had. "But tell Gates fine." Kai closed his eyes, signalling he was done with the discussion.

Kai heard Jon stand, hesitate a moment, then slowly walk away.

A few hours later, Jon realized Kai's complaints about Mexitil hadn't been exaggerated as he held his brother while he threw up what little fluid remained in his stomach. It had only take about thirty minutes after the beginning of the Mexitil infusion to hit Kai—hard. Even though Kai had nothing in his stomach—the feeding tube emptying directly into his duodenum—the nausea was so bad Kai had begun to gag anyway. Jon had signaled for a nurse, who had quickly added a powerful antiemetic to Kai's drug cocktail, but it hadn't yet kicked in.

Kai's strength had returned slightly, if muted. He was still weak, but he'd regained some movement in his hands and arms, and he gripped Jon as tightly as he could as he heaved. Jon whispered encouragingly until Kai grew still, the vomiting stalled for now. He took a damp rag

he'd kept nearby and carefully cleaned Kai's mouth, spending extra time around where the feeding tube lay against his lips.

"So sick," Kai said with a groan, closing his eyes.

"I know," Jon replied, smoothing his brother's hair.

"Dizzy."

Jon frowned. "The antiemetic should start working soon."

"Not soon enough," Kai said through a grimace.

Jon held his brother, knowing there wasn't much else he could do. "It'll be 'K, K," Jon whispered.

Kai made a sound that could have been a laugh that quickly devolved into a groan.

"How's your pain?"

Kai breathed for a little while, measured, careful breaths, before answering. "Six, overall. But my right thigh *really* hurts. Eight. No. Nine."

Jon frowned. "Gates said you hurt your quadriceps. He's not sure how bad yet."

"Shit," Kai said in a whisper.

"He suspects you have tendon and ligament damage in your left leg, too, but he wants to wait until you're a little more stable before he does an MRI."

"Why Gates was so adamant about the Mexitil," Kai said.

"Partially. Feeling sleepy yet?"

"Mm. Little bit."

"Sleep. I'll be here when you wake up. Promise."

Jon could tell instantly when his brother fell asleep; the grimace that had seemed etched into his face faded, and he almost looked peaceful. Jon took the opportunity to rinse out the emesis basin in the sink, and when he'd returned, Kai's nurse, Mary, had entered with some supplies.

"Phenergan finally kicked in?"

Jon sighed. "Finally." He watched as Mary grabbed gloves from the holder on the wall and slipped them on.

"Did he vomit much?"

"Didn't have much in his stomach to throw up."

Mary nodded. "I'll have to check his feeding tube, make sure it didn't get displaced." Before getting to work, she eyed Jon. "You should probably think of getting some rest. Eat something."

Jon frowned. "I promised him I'd be here when he woke up."

Mary offered a faint smile as she found the external end of Kai's feeding tube, clipped to a machine off to the side of the room, and uncapped it. "He'll be asleep long enough for you to go downstairs and grab a sandwich, Dr. Taylor."

Vicky was hunched at her desk, sorting through the latest billing disaster, when she heard a knock on her door. If it was that new fellow, Sebastian—Dr. Kainer—she was going to scream. He had to be smart to have gotten so far in his career, but honestly, the guy was incapable of filling out paperwork properly.

"Come in," she said in a gruff voice.

She heard the door open, and the din of the clinic filtered in.

"I don't want to interrupt," a familiar voice said.

She smiled reflexively, then forced her face to neutral before spinning around in her chair. "Dr. Taylor."

The past couple days hadn't been particularly kind; exhaustion and worry clung to him, his gray eyes dim, deep purple circles under them.

“You’re not in clinic today?” She said it as a question, even though she knew he wasn’t; he had barely left Kai’s bedside since Sunday evening except when she or someone else would remind him to eat and take care of his blood sugar.

“No,” he said, his voice barely audible.

Vicky’s heart beat a little faster, fluttering in her throat. Either Jon was here because Kai was worse, or he’d come to see her. Both options made her stomach do little flips. She rose from her chair, but didn’t close their distance, noticing how he leaned back against the door. What if she judged wrong? After all, nothing had ever come of things last year, when Kai had been so sick. Why should things change now? Just because she’d suckered him into going to that costume party, it didn’t mean anything. She inwardly chastised herself for even thinking of the party; depending on how things went with Kai, Jon wouldn’t be going anyway.

“Jon.” She eyed him, almost as one would a stray animal you weren’t sure what to expect of. Finally, she took a breath. “How’s Kai?”

Jon let out a long, weary breath of his own, and pulled his fingers through his hair. “I kinda need to eat something.”

Vicky nodded, understanding, his response not assuaging the strange ball of anxiety in her chest. She crossed to him, hesitated a moment, then gently wrapped her fingers around his wrist. The gesture didn’t quite have the intimacy of held hands, but still gave him the reassurance she wanted—needed—to give him. “How low’s your sugar?”

“Not . . . not too bad. I just . . .” Jon’s eyes met Vicky’s for a moment, held, and she could see he wanted to tell her more without having to say anything. He swallowed. “I need to eat and get back to him.”

She studied his eyes for a moment, then led him by the wrist to the small couch nudged into one corner of her office, pushing him into it. He didn’t resist, sinking down and leaning his head against the wall, watching as she went to her desk phone.

“Betty? Looks like I’ll be working through lunch again. Could you? Yeah. Make it two. I skipped breakfast this morning.” She winked at Jon, absently twirling the cord around one finger. “Uh huh. Thanks. I owe ya.”

She hung up and took her seat beside Jon.

“Betty brings you your lunch?” he finally asked. Betty was the receptionist for the pulmonology outpatient clinic.

“As a favor, some days. When I’m extra busy. It saves me thirty minutes, sometimes more.” She lifted her shoulder in a slight shrug. “I figure you’d prefer to eat here in peace and quiet. Plus, it’ll be quicker.”

Jon nodded.

Vicky let the silence hang for several minutes before finally risking the question again. “So, how’s Kai?”

Jon let out a long breath. “Out of imminent danger. Finally,” Jon said, his eyes sliding shut. “He’s awake, out of ICU. But he’s on a cocktail of drugs that make him really sick. And it’s likely he injured the muscles, ligaments, and tendons of his legs. Possibly badly. It’s too early to know, and the drugs are only keeping the spasms at bay.”

Vicky laid her hand on top of Jon’s, not saying anything.

“I feel like this is all my fault somehow. If I’d been more there for him, maybe—”

“Jon,” Vicky said, her voice soft. She squeezed his hand and saw moisture on his cheeks he fought to blink away. “I know you want to protect Kai from everything, but you can’t.”

He nodded and hung his head. They sat in silence a moment, and he seemed about to speak again when there was a knock on her door.

“That’ll be Betty,” she whispered, rising. “One sec!” Vicky grabbed her purse out of a drawer on her way to answer the door, slipping out some cash and quickly trading it for the food, making sure to block the view of her office with her body. Vicky liked Betty well enough, but she could be an incorrigible gossip.

“Sure you don’t want help carrying it in?” Betty asked, a little too obviously trying to see around Vicky into the office. Luckily for Jon, Betty was short and chubby, and didn’t have a chance to see around Vicky’s taller frame.

“That’s all right. Thanks again. Gotta get back to work.” Vicky smiled and managed to shut the door in a way that conveyed urgency, rather than rudeness.

“I left my insulin in my office,” Jon said, his voice weary. “She’ll see me when I leave to get it.”

“Doesn’t mean she needs to be sticking her nose in now,” Vicky said, matter of factly, offering one of the boxes of food to Jon.

Jon accepted it, along with a package of utensils, but waited for Vicky to join him before opening it. “I never . . . thanked you.” He stared down at the food, teasing it with the fork. “For taking care of me.”

“Jon.”

He shook his head. “I shouldn’t have needed someone. Last year or these past few days. . . . But I did. I fell apart, and you were there to make sure I didn’t die from hypoglycemia or ketoacidosis.”

She laughed softly, warmly, and then, without thinking, she leaned forward and pressed a light kiss on his lips.

He jerked back, surprised, and her heart fell into her stomach.

“Oh, Jon. I’m—I don’t know what—I’m sorry.”

He didn’t speak. His face was unreadable as he blinked a few times, his gray eyes studying her. Then he hesitantly lifted a hand to cup her cheek and kissed her again. It was a tentative, chaste kiss, but she could feel his body practically vibrating—of course, it could be low-blood sugar shakes, but Vicky didn’t think so. Jon wasn’t a good liar in the traditional sense. His best lies were those of omission, of careful word choice, perhaps honed from his training as a physician. If he had lied to her about his blood sugar, she’d know.

They pulled apart, a bit dazed.

“Oh,” he said hoarsely.

“I’m sorry,” Vicky said, but her eyes didn’t move from Jon’s. For the first time, she noticed small flecks of green and blue nestled among the gray of his irises. “This is a totally inappropriate time.”

“It is,” Jon said, so seriously that Vicky’s stomach knotted. “But Kai would say time is limited and you should live life.” Jon frowned. “I’m talking like he’s dead.”

Vicky squeezed Jon’s arm. “You’re right. Eat, take care of your blood sugar, go back to him. We’ll talk later. To be continued?”

Jon actually smiled. It was such a rare sight, and it reminded her of how truly handsome he was. “To be continued,” he said, and he leaned forward, dusting his lips against her cheek, before digging into his food.

Renee was busy reshelving books in the mystery section after a frazzled group of old ladies had messed the entire section up in their combined quest for large print (which Renee had reminded them numerous times was in another part of the store) along with their search for “that one book with the black cover and the white lettering.” She sank into one of the wingchairs momentarily as she arranged a stack of paperbacks. The store was quiet after the relative lunch rush, and she’d find it almost peaceful if it weren’t for the fact that Kai still lingered in her mind. Had it only been a few days since the morning they’d sat here together and he’d begged for her to give him an opportunity to explain himself?

It felt like forever ago. And then he’d stood her up, and even though she’d promised Diane she’d forget about him and move on, she’d agonized all Monday hoping to see him in class. But he never showed. Even today, part of her half-hoped every time the door chimed that

it would be him, and he'd look at her with those soulful blue eyes and apologize and she'd forget all the bad and just remember that one, wonderful kiss.

"Everything all right?"

Renee jumped. For an old guy, Art sure had a way of sneaking up on people. "Uh, yeah. Just finishing up here," she said, her heart racing.

Art chuckled, moved some books out of the way, and took a seat in the other chair. "I don't bite, Renee. Would've thought you'd figured that out by now."

She blushed.

"Know it's none of my business, but did you and Kai sort out . . . whatever it was needed sorting the other day?"

Renee sighed, and debated saying something to end the conversation. But then, Art knew Kai, had known him a long time. Maybe he'd have some insight she didn't? "Uh, I think he's been avoiding me." She suddenly was intently focused on arranging the pile in front of her. Art inhaled sharply through his nose. "That doesn't sound like Kai."

Renee stacked some of the books with a little more force than was necessary, making a loud thump. "Saturday morning he asked to see me that night, and he didn't show. I haven't heard from him or seen him since."

In her peripheral vision, Renee saw Art stand again. "How much has Kai told you about himself?"

Surprised, Renee looked up, but Art's back was to her, his shoulders working as he fixed the spines on some of the novels. "Um, not much, honestly," she admitted, blushing again. "He told me he was an orphan, that he has a bad leg. We were supposed to meet so we could get to know each other better."

"It's not my place to get involved, but I'll say this much: Kai's a good kid. Life hasn't been easy for him, but he always does right by his friends. If he's been MIA, he has a good reason for it. Trust me on that much."

Jon watched Kai for nearly a half hour while his brother slept. Seemingly peacefully at first. But as the time stretched, he began to moan softly, and Jon could see the faint twitchings of his legs beneath the sheets. Spasms. They were slower, less powerful and frequent than they would be without the drugs, but they were there.

Kai's murmurs grew more pained, louder, almost like a young child locked in a nightmare. He wouldn't be asleep much longer. The monitor beeped as his heart rate increased sharply.

"Shh, Kai. It's OK. It's OK," Jon whispered, taking one of Kai's arms and smoothing the skin there.

Kai's cries grew louder, the sounds drawing out so that they were almost one long, low noise. It was the most vocal Jon had ever heard Kai be because of his pain. It reached up inside his chest and squeezed his heart to hear it.

A moment later, Mary came in. Likely drawn by the monitor's alarm, although Kai was getting loud enough it was possible she heard him, too. After a quick glance at the monitors, and Kai's legs, her eyes met Jon's.

"I'm going to get Gates on the phone. See how he wants to handle this."

Jon nodded, leaned closer to his brother, as if that would somehow protect him.

Kai let out a pathetic little sound, disturbingly inhuman, like a wounded puppy. Then his eyes opened halfway, and they met Jon's. "Hurt," he said in a voice unlike his own, small, scared.

"I know," Jon whispered. "Your doctor will be here soon. He'll make it better." It pained Jon to say "he" instead of "I," especially since he wasn't sure Gates could do anything other than sedate Kai again with more Pavulon. Which would mean back to ICU. The spasms weren't nearly as bad as they could be, Jon knew, but Kai was already hurting, and even small twitches that

pulled at injured muscles and tendons could magnify significantly what would otherwise have been minor pain. And that didn't account for any nerve damage Kai could have suffered as well.

Kai's eyes opened a little more, his pupils wide, glossy. "Really hurt," Kai whined. Jon had never heard Kai whine before. Ever. The drugs and the pain were clearly affecting his brother's ability to be his usual stoic, "I'm fine" self. Kai let out a small sob, and Jon felt Kai's fingers—weakly—tighten on his own. Kai's eyes were shut, his cheeks wet with tears.

"It'll be 'K, K," Jon said, doing his best to offer what little comfort he could.

"Dizzy. Sick."

Jon frowned. The antiemetic had worn off, but Kai was on a steady drip of Mexitil, which kept the spasms from being too quick or intense, and it prevented his muscles from locking up. But it didn't stop the spasms, or the pain. And on top of it all, Kai had the side effects. Maybe sedating Kai again would be a mercy.

Kai let out a sound that was half scream, half sob as Jon saw—saw Kai's back arch slowly, painfully, like an unseen force were torturing him on an invisible rack. Kai's breathing became more sporadic, the monitor howling out another alarm. Then the spasm ended, leaving Kai loose, boneless, panting and sobbing. He heaved, making horrid retching sounds, but nothing came up.

Mary reentered, pushing a tray of supplies, another nurse in tow, who was wheeling a biPAP machine. "Kai, I'm Mary, your nurse. And this is Ellie. She's going to help me get you feeling better."

Kai's only response was a whimper, squeezing his eyes tightly closed. Mary nodded to Jon, and he tried to rise to give the nurses space to work, but Kai clung to him with what meager strength he had.

"No. Please. Don't leave me."

"Kai, I'll be right here. They need to take care of you."

Kai sobbed, and linked his fingers into Jon's as best he could.

Jon looked up at Mary, who shook her head, her face suggesting she'd handle this. "Kai, we're going to put a mask on your face. It'll be just oxygen at first. Then I'm going to give you some medicine that will stop the spasms and you won't be able to move. But the mask will keep you breathing, OK? Then I'll give you something to make you sleep for a little while. It'll take the pain away. OK?"

As Mary and Ellie started moving, prepping Kai, Jon thought it would be better to knock Kai out first. But it was possible that the order was at Gates' specific directive; stop the spasms ASAP. Then, and only then, sedate Kai for the sake of his mind.

Jon had begun to inch away, to give the nurses the opportunity to work on his brother, heading toward the foot of the bed.

"Jon?" Kai's voice was frightened.

"I'm here. I'm not going anywhere. Just getting out of their way." He touched Kai's feet lightly through the blanket. "That's me, touching you."

"Jon," Kai said again, his voice even more like that of a child, sitting alone in the dark and praying there was someone else out there.

"Shh. It'll be 'K, K," Jon whispered.

"Try to relax," Mary said in a soft, reassuring voice. "We've got to move you a little. Then the mask. OK?"

Kai had been positioned partially on his left side, so with a coordinated effort, the two nurses shifted him onto his back. Mary did the bulk of the moving, using the sheets to help—Kai was not a small man—with Ellie making sure his hurt right leg was secure and not further injured in the process. They were careful. Delicate. But Kai still whimpered.

As they worked, Mary spoke soothingly to Kai, explaining everything she was doing. Jon watched as Ellie carefully lifted Kai's head so Mary could position the straps of the biPAP mask

underneath it. It didn't take long for her to fix the mask securely in place while Ellie started the flow of oxygen.

She continued to speak in soft tones, one hand on Kai's chest, observing that the mask fit properly. "I'm going to start the drugs now."

"Jon!" Kai cried, panicked. Jon wasn't sure why Kai was reacting like this. He normally took things in stride. Usually, it was almost impossible to know what he was feeling, except when he let his anger explode out. It was like the stress, pain, and drugs had stripped Kai's outer protective layers away, and what was left was the raw, scared, hurting young man underneath. Jon wondered if seeing this side of Kai had anything to do with the marks he had yet had a chance to ask about.

"I'm here," Jon said, touching Kai's feet. "I'm right here."

"You won't be asleep long. Not more than an hour," Mary assured Kai as she injected what had to be the Pavulon into Kai's IV. "You're going to start feeling this almost immediately. Don't be scared."

Kai blinked once. Twice. Three times. Then his body went still, the spasms in his legs stopping. Mary nodded to Ellie, and Jon heard the biPAP turn on, saw the forced rise and fall of his brother's chest.

"I'm right here," Jon said, working his way back to Kai's side now that Mary and Ellie were sure the biPAP was working sufficiently to keep Kai breathing. He made sure his hands ghosted along Kai's body as he moved, so Kai could feel his brother, even if he couldn't move or see him right now.

"You'll be asleep in seconds," Mary said in that same voice. She could have done relaxation tapes. Jon held Kai's hand as Mary connected Kai to the Propofol drip. Because of the paralytic, it was harder to tell when Kai went under as it normally would, but the monitor revealed Kai's heart rate slowing, and after a few more checks, Mary nodded, laying a gentle hand on Kai's chest. "There he is." She sighed. "How's his sats?"

For a second, Jon thought she was asking him, but then Ellie responded, "Good."

Mary smiled and nodded, apparently the signal for Ellie that she was excused. Mary checked Kai's IVs, catheter, etc., as Jon watched his brother sleep.

"Dr. Gates should be here before Kai wakes up," she informed Jon.

Jon nodded, but said nothing.

Dr. Gates arrived about thirty-five minutes later. He shook Jon's hand, then examined Kai thoroughly, asking Jon a few questions since he'd been there during the last flare up, and taking his time to look at Kai's right thigh. It was swollen and red, and hot to the touch.

"It's worse today," Gates said with a frown.

Jon sighed. "He was in a lot of pain. More than I've ever seen. I think the spasms . . ."

Gates nodded, carefully resecured Kai's leg, then covered him again with the blankets. "I don't want to wait much longer to get that MRI, and I'm going to call in a good ortho consult to review the films and examine Kai."

"What's your plan?"

Gates sighed through his nose. "I've been treating Kai since he was a kid. He's had a few bad patches. When he was growing, mostly. Around age two, ten, fourteen. Worse each time. But this may be the worst I've seen him. He's not responding the way he should."

Jon nodded. "He's scared."

"It's one reason I went for the noninvasive ventilation today. I'll see how he is when he wakes up. I'll bump up his meds, temporarily. Hopefully, it'll control the spasms. With any luck, after a few more days, I'll be able to drop his dosages so he can go home."

Jon nodded. "What about his pain?"

Gates sucked air through his teeth. "I want to stay away from anything that'll depress his breathing any more. So our options are limited. But I'll do what I can."

Jon grunted. But he knew Gates was against a wall. Kai wouldn't want to be intubated, or even on the biPAP for any longer than necessary. The cocktail of muscle relaxants already put his breathing at risk.

"I'll be back to check on him in about twenty minutes, as he comes up."

Jon offered a terse nod, then sank back into his chair. He suddenly felt very tired.

Nikki fought with her hair, which kept escaping the ponytail she'd hurriedly stuffed it into. The wind was fierce, heralding the storm she could feel in the humid air and see in the darkening sky that made four-thirty in the afternoon look like night. She ducked into the alley, taking a shortcut toward the storage room of the diner, hoping she'd find a spare cigarette in some back recess of the small locker Marge'd let her use. She hadn't spent long with Kai, having rushed to see him almost immediately after getting off her last shift, and desperate for sleep. But she'd hardly gotten to rest, her mind worrying, imagining him beside her in bed the way he'd been Saturday night, then shifting to him, so cold and still in the hospital that first day, then confused and groggy this morning, brain still hazy from days of heavy drugs.

Maybe she had a cigarette, or some gum or something in her bag. She slowed her steps, moved her purse to her stomach, and bent her head, digging through it. Restless was not a good way to start a long graveyard shift, even if it was Tuesday.

Nikki barely realized she'd been shoved from behind until her face hit the brick wall of the alley, hard, her vision swimming with stars. She tried to struggle, but a heavy, muscled body pinned her in place, the smell of cheap cologne and cigarettes assaulting her nose.

"Mark." One side of Nikki's face was pressed to the wall, and she struggled to see him through her good eye.

"You never call, you never write. Makes a guy feel neglected."

Nikki squirmed, testing his grip, managing to free one of her hands just slightly.

"Neglected. Didn't think you could use words with more than two syllables."

He shoved her harder against the wall. "Oh, I know one or two. *Monica*."

Nikki froze; she hadn't heard that name in years. "I'm Nikki Browne, now," she said, trying to hide the threatening panic from her voice as she surreptitiously eased one hand into her purse.

Mark laughed. "A whore with a girl-next-door name is still a whore."

Nikki sorted through her purse blindly, doing her best to keep her movements as small as possible so Mark wouldn't notice. "We're square, Mark. You know that."

He licked his way up her neck toward her ear, and she had to fight the instinct to flinch. *Keep him distracted*, she thought, as her hand found the item she'd been praying was still deep in the recesses of her bag.

"Maybe I decided you still owe me. Maybe I decided it's time you stop playing house with that charity case you seem so fond of. Maybe time you stop pretending you're anything but a cheap whore and come back to Chicago with me."

A loud clap of thunder resounded in the alley as the first pellets of heavy rain began to fall. Nikki carefully flicked the blade open in a move she'd practiced thousands of times. As Mark talked, she counted. Then, in one quick movement, she tore her hand free, stabbing the blade half blindly into Mark, praying she'd hit something fleshy enough to force him to release her.

He let out a harsh cry of pain and fury, taking enough of a step away that Nikki was able to kick out, her foot landing hard mid-torso, knocking him further back as the wind whooshed out of him. She ran for the door, grateful it wouldn't be locked this time of day, not losing time in looking back. Her breath came hard and fast, her heart thrumming. Either she'd make it, or she wouldn't, and she couldn't think of that possibility; she was out of tricks. If Mark got her again. .

..

She heard wet footsteps behind her, then a crash and a curse as Mark slipped on the newly wet concrete. The nonslip shoes she wore for work helped her reach the door just in time.

She ducked in, damp, shaking fingers fumbling for the lock. It clicked just as a loud thump made her hop back.

Mark's muffled shouts permeated through the metal. "Fucking, Goddamned bitch!"

Nikki slid to the floor, catching her breath, water dripping around her, hating herself every time her shoulders jerked when Mark pounded again, still screaming and cursing. It felt like she spent hours in this position, but knew it had to be only seconds before Clyde emerged from the kitchen, cleaver in hand, followed by Marge.

Marge locked eyes with Nikki, then the secured door—intended to keep out thieves, it wouldn't be broken down easily or quickly—and looked to Clyde. "Call the police."

Clyde hesitated a moment, then obeyed, disappearing back into the kitchen.

Marge extended her hand for Nikki, who reluctantly accepted it, getting back to her feet. "He'll be gone long before anyone gets here."

"You can still file a report," Marge said, hissing as she examined Nikki's face. "Scraped you up pretty bad, but nothing serious."

"I'm not pressing charges."

"Hell you are," Marge said over her shoulder as she dug through the first aid supplies. "I'm patching you up, you're talking to the police, and then you're going home."

"No," Nikki said immediately, almost before Marge had time to finish speaking.

Marge sighed. "No offense, hon, but you're in no shape to be serving paying customers."

"Then I'll work in the back. I can't go home, not now, OK? Please, Marge."

"Your eye's already starting to bruise." Marge shook her head as she dabbed at the worst scrapes on Nikki's cheek. "You can stay if you talk to the police. And if you won't file a report, I will. I may not own this place, but it's still my restaurant. I'll say he was trying to break in."

Nikki sighed heavily, winced. "Thanks, Marge."

Marge frowned, grunted. "I protect my own."

Nikki nodded faintly, wondering if Marge would still say that if she knew the truth. That Mark wasn't some jealous ex-boyfriend. The things Nikki had done before she'd found Jonesville and the refuge of the diner after the end of a long road of bad.

September 13, 2000

Kai wasn't sure the hour; like ICU, the step-down unit room was windowless and gave little indication to signal the passage of time. He suspected it was early morning, the nurse's shift change happening soon, since his night nurse had drawn some blood and recorded all his current vitals not long before. She'd encouraged him to get some sleep, and he'd promised he would, but had spent however many minutes since then staring at his sleeping brother instead, in far too much pain, his stomach swirling with barely-suppressed nausea, to fall asleep himself.

Yesterday was a fog, but he faintly remembered a bout of spasms, fear and pain mingling together, overwhelming him. He'd been sick, and hurting, and terrified, and he'd let it show, acting like an ignorant child, embarrassing himself in front of Jon. Even before his transplant, he'd never let Jon see his fear, truly see his pain, because Jon was an empath who could imagine enough on his own, who wanted to save the world, and who bore any failures—even if they weren't his fault—harshly. If Jon ever learned, ever found out some of the things Kai had lived through while they were apart. . . .

Suddenly, Jon's pager sounded, snapping him awake. It took him a moment to pull his mind from sleep; Jon didn't sleep much, but usually by the time he did, he sank deep, even if it didn't last. Jon checked the number, frowning, before rising to stretch.

"Please tell me you slept a little," Jon said, smoothing some of Kai's hair out of his face.

Kai debated a full-out lie for a moment, then decided for a diversionary tactic. "Do you need to answer that?"

Jon sighed and looked at his waist again, though he didn't remove the pager. "Yeah. But I promised you."

"And I appreciate it. But I'm scheduled for tests and prodding all morning anyway." Gates had Kai's nephrologist coming in, Dr. Johnsen, and a cardiologist to look into Kai's blood pressure problem, and later, he was scheduled for an MRI and a consult with an orthopedist to determine how badly the spasms had hurt his legs.

"I haven't even thought about work the past few days," Jon said, as if defending himself. "But this . . . I asked to be paged when the test results for this patient came in. . . ."

"Jon." The nausea was welling up now, and Kai had to force himself to focus, to not let Jon see.

"He's fifteen. If they're paging me, it means it's Aspergillosis."

Kai's stomach did an extra flip, and he had to close his eyes to keep from retching. This kid had to be one of Jon's FS, or maybe CF patients. Aspergillosis was a serious situation in which the immune system in the lungs overreacted to a fungus that naturally occurred in the air, causing serious complications. Kai had been fortunate enough never to suffer from it, but he'd had friends who had. It could be treated, with limited success, but never completely eliminated. It was possible this kid would die.

A little too close to home for both brothers.

"Go. I'll be fine."

Jon nodded, his brow furrowed in worry, perhaps for both his patient and Kai. "I'll make it back as soon as I can. I promise."

Hours later, Kai gripped the sheets in both hands, trying not to scream as the orthopedist, Dr. Micovic, examined his legs. Fire shot up his left thigh as the doctor manipulated his knee, but the real pain came with his right. Kai held his breath as the ortho pressed against the tender flesh, Kai's knuckles whitening as the doctor tested the range of motion of his right knee, which had been fixed at nearly 90-degrees since his admission, apparently, and hurt like a motherfucker any time Kai or anyone else moved it.

Finally, the ortho finished his exam and Kai was able to catch his breath. Pain still throbbed through his body, making him dizzy, but he needed to focus. He could pass out later, preferably doped up on something nice.

“I was pretty certain from the films, but the examination clinches it. The ligaments in your left leg have been strained, so the joint’s loose, and that’s where most of the pain is coming from. But if your orthotist adjusts the brace for a closer fit around the knee, you should be OK. The bigger issue is your right leg.”

“Yeah, it hurts like hell.”

Dr. Micovic nodded. “You’ve torn the muscle, and the swelling’s irritating the nerve.”

Kai covered his face with one hand, murmuring a curse into his palm. “How bad is it?”

“It’s a partial tear, so that’s the good news, but I saw a lot of scarring in the muscle on the MRI from previous tiny tears that have healed over. So that complicates things.”

Of course.

Kai watched Micovic cross his arms on his chest. It was never a good sign when a surgeon did that. “Normally, with an injury like this, I’d advocate surgery. Suture the tear, repair the scars as best I can. But in your case, I think rest, keeping the joint immobilized, and physical therapy to gradually increase flexion is the way to go.”

“And weight bearing.”

The doctor swallowed, his muscular arms tensed beneath the fabric of his white coat. *Fuck.* “If the tear doesn’t heal well, walking or standing, even with orthotics, may not be possible.”

Kai closed his eyes, gritted his teeth. “So you’re saying since I’m already crippled, why do surgery? What does it matter if I never walk or even *stand* again?”

The surgeon balked, and actually stepped back. It took him a moment to recover. “You’re not a good candidate for surgery.” Micovic counted off on his fingers. “Firstly, because you’re immunocompromised so you’re at an increased risk for infection; secondly, because your blood pressure’s been unstable, which ups your chance for dying on the table. But mostly because of your MLS. The success of a fix like this relies on keeping the joint immobile for weeks at a time. Even with a brace, that’s not possible with your MLS. It’s not worth putting your life at risk for a repair that could be completely ruined within hours after surgery.”

Kai frowned, his face blank, speechless. He let his eyes slide closed for a few seconds. He’d known it was bad; he’d never felt pain quite like this before, but he never imagined. . . . “Can you at least give me something for the pain?”

The orthopedist unfolded his arms and scratched his forehead.

“Jesus,” Kai sighed.

“Gates doesn’t want you on anything that’ll suppress your breathing, and NSAIDs have been shown to inhibit healing in injuries like this. Tylenol, keeping it slightly elevated and the joint immobile, and ice are the best things we can do right now. In a week, you can start PT, but I won’t lie to you. Best case, it’ll take weeks before you can support weight with that leg, and if everything goes well, months before you can walk on it again.”

Nikki hovered just outside Kai’s open door, debating about going in. She peeked through the partially closed blinds on the large glass window and saw the nurse was there, which gave her time to change her mind. She wanted to see him, especially now that he was doing better, but her hair could hide the injured portion of her face only so long, and was she ready to tell him? If he knew about Mark, she’d either have to lie and say he was an old, jealous boyfriend, or tell him the truth. And if he knew the truth, would he look at her the same way? Would he even *want* to look at her again?

“How’s your pain?” the nurse’s voice filtered out.

“Just shy of passing out,” Kai said. His tone was jovial, but his words were halting, strained. He wasn’t joking.

“The ice will help.”

“I’ll go back on the biPAP for morphine,” Kai said, any feigned mirth lost in simple pained pleading.

“I’ll talk to your doctor and be back to check on you in a few minutes.” A moment later, she exited, nodding to Nikki as she passed.

It was now or never. Taking a breath, checking her hair, Nikki knocked softly on the door and strode in. The head of Kai’s bed was just a few degrees from flat, the foot raised. His right leg was bent at the knee, supported by a pillow, the ice pack on his thigh. His eyes were closed, and though he looked much better than he had yesterday, he was pale, his hair clinging to his forehead with sweat, his breath effortful and calculated. Nikki could see the subtle twitches of his nose and brow and jaw, the quick rise and fall of his chest that signalled the severity of his pain.

As she drew closer, his mouth twisted into what he likely intended to be a smile but was actually more grimace than grin, then slowly opened his eyes.

“Giving the nurses trouble?”

“None of them kiss nearly as well as you,” he drawled.

She let out a short laugh, made sure to angle her head so he was less likely to see the hair as the veil it was. “I don’t know. That one nurse. Jack? He’s pretty good.”

“Uses too much tongue,” Kai said, his smile faint, but present. Nikki realized how tired he seemed, the pain wearing on him.

She worked her hand into his and squeezed. “How’d it go with the muscle doctor this morning?” she asked hesitantly.

Kai took in a harsh breath. “Fine.”

“Mmm. And right now. You’re fine, too?”

“Yup. Tap dance routine’s in an hour. Stick around or you’ll miss it.” His forehead wrinkled sternly, and she heard him swallow. Then he opened his eyes, looked at their joined hands. His face changed immediately, and Nikki had to resist the urge to pull away. She’d forgotten her arms were scraped up, especially her right, from being rubbed against the rough brick of the alley wall. His eyes darted up toward her face, then narrowed. “You’ve done your hair different.”

She swallowed. “I’m overdue for a change, so I thought I’d test out a few different looks before I commit.”

Kai’s lips dipped into a frown. “What happened.” It was a statement, not a question. He hadn’t been fooled.

“Nothing,” she said, laughing nervously, turning her head away.

“Move your hair.”

“What?”

“Push it aside.”

She started to shake her head, realized that would reveal herself, stopped, then simply said, “No.”

He reached toward her, but she leaned back, out of his range. “Don’t make me get up and do it myself,” he said with a smirk, but his eyes were fierce, focused on her.

She managed a smile. “I’m fine.”

“Just like I’m fine. Nikki. I know the hair trick.” He hesitated a moment, his eyes shifted away, then returned to her. “I’ve *done* that trick.”

She dipped her head, focusing on their fingers; his were long, thin, rounded and flat on the ends. If she let him see her face, she’d have to tell him about Mark. And if she told him about Mark, he’d have questions. She didn’t want to lie to him. She didn’t want to hide or run anymore. Taking a deep breath, she raised her chin and pushed her hair aside, tucking it behind her ear.

Kai's breath caught. She knew how bad it seemed; she'd seen herself in the mirror before she'd come. The bruising around her eye was a mix of purples and greens, and though it didn't hurt really, it looked awful. Her cheek, like she'd been dragged on a sidewalk, and her lip had a split that had scabbed aggressively on the edge.

Finally, she let herself meet his eyes, which had gone steely. "Who did this to you?"

She shook her head.

Felt him squeeze her hand. "Nikki."

She couldn't meet his eyes. "A guy I knew a long time ago. Before I came to Jonesville."

His eyebrows dipped. "Where did this happen?" Even though the anger in his voice wasn't directed at her, it made her recoil.

"Outside the diner. Last night, before my shift. But it's fine. Don't worry about it."

"The fuck I won't."

Nikki pulled her hand away, wrapped her arms around herself. God, what was she thinking? "It's fine. I'm fine." She forced herself to meet his eyes. Maybe she could convince him to leave it. She'd backed herself into this corner, but now all she wanted was a way out. "It's not like you can do anything about it anyway."

His face slackened, his jaw dropped, and his eyes grew round, shimmered. The hurt she saw there made her sick, and she reflexively pushed back, rose to her feet.

"Kai—I—didn't—" she stammered, desperately fighting her tongue.

He blinked rapidly. "Get out," he said, his voice a whisper, marred by her harried attempts at an apology, explanation. "Get out," he repeated, firmer, louder.

"Kai—"

"Get. Out!" He'd covered his face, but she still couldn't get the image of his eyes, so betrayed and sad, out of her mind.

"I'm sorry," she said at last, heading for the door. Her vision grew blurry, and she sucked in a breath, blinking, looking up, because she wouldn't cry. She never cried.

Oh, fuck, she thought, shielding her face with her hair and a hand as she hurried down the hospital hallway, a single drop dampening the fabric of her shirt.

Normally, Jon could get lost in his work. He loved taking care of patients. He found pulmonary physiology fascinating; it never ceased to amaze him how incredible modern mechanical respiration was, even if it had its cons and flaws. Sometimes, his favorite moments were those in which he visited a patient for the first time after they'd successfully weaned off the respirator, breathing on their own for the first time, often after days or even weeks.

Normally, he liked the music of the ICU and CCU, the shuffle of feet, the whisper of nurses, the ringing of phones and clicking of keys, the beeping of monitors and hiss, whoosh of respirators. He liked knowing that he was needed, that his decisions—to prone a patient or change the settings on a respirator—could make a difference. He knew that there were dozens of people, most of them young, who led better, healthier, fuller lives because of his treatments and interventions.

Normally, that made even the bad days good.

But not today. Kai still wasn't out of the woods, and though Jon was hopeful, he was skeptical any of the consults would solve the mystery of Kai's blood pressure problems. And now, now Jon had to examine Martin Gomez again before he spoke to the boy's mother.

Jon had been treating Martin for years, even as a fellow, watching him turn from a tiny, shy boy into the beginnings of a man. He'd also seen Martin go from monthly ER visits and quarterly hospital admissions, sometimes for weeks at a time, to having his FS controlled. Until recently, Martin breathed well most days as long as he was dutiful with his medicine and careful, and if Jon was able to treat potential infections early before they blossomed into full-blown pneumonia.

But the past few months had been rough for him, his body seeming to resist the drugs that had worked for years, his lungs producing more mucus than ever, even with increased drugs and coughing treatments. A week earlier, Martin had been brought in by ambulance after his mother woke up in the middle of the night with a “bad feeling.” When she’d gone to check on him, she found Martin had stopped breathing.

Jon hadn’t been on-call when Martin was admitted, and the attending had started Martin on antibiotics when his X-rays suggested pneumonia. By the time Jon was called in a few days later, it was clear pneumonia wasn’t the issue, at least not the primary one. So Jon had ordered blood tests and biopsies, suspecting Aspergillosis and leaving strict instructions he was to be paged as soon as the results came in.

Now they had, and Jon had seen the figures and the notes and the samples. There was no doubt. Martin’s lungs were being destroyed by his own immune system.

Jon entered the ICU room, squaring his shoulders and putting on his neutral face. Martin’s mother, Inez, sat beside her son’s bed, reading softly aloud from her bible. Jon eased into the room, attempting to be as unobtrusive as possible. Even at a distance, Jon could see Martin’s saturation numbers weren’t good. It was times like these, when he knew there was little he could do, that he hated his job.

“Dr. Taylor,” Inez said, surprised, taking off her reading glasses and rising from her seat, setting her bible aside. “We weren’t expecting you.” Inez always spoke like that, “we” or “us,” even when Martin was unconscious.

Looking into her dark, trusting eyes, Jon felt his stomach clench. Jon lied to the fellows and residents he trained. Told them the more bad news you gave, the easier it got to deliver it. But it wasn’t true. It never got easier.

“Could you give me a few minutes with him, Mrs. Gomez?”

“*Ay, recuérdese. Por favor, Inez.*”

Jon offered a faint smile, a nod. “*Claro que sí, Inez. Un momentico, por favor. Después, necesito hablar con usted.*” Jon spoke with an accent, but his Spanish was actually very good; certainly better than his ASL.

“*Claro. Se espero afuera.*” She patted his arm and disappeared into the hall, likely heading for the waiting room for a drink.

Alone with Martin, Jon went through the exam on autopilot, checking his pulses, his fingernails, listening to his heart and lungs, adjusting some of the settings on the respirator. Jon was studying the nurse’s notes in the chart when he heard footsteps and looked up. Jo, one of the best respiratory nurses Jonesville had, stood on the opposite side of the bed.

“What did his mucus look like last time you suctioned him?”

“Very thick, even for FS. Nasty. Some blood in it.”

Jon nodded, glanced down at Martin, who, at fifteen, was still small and underweight. Though he looked nothing like Kai, Jon couldn’t help remembering those horrible final weeks over a year ago, when Kai had lain, much like this, a shadow of a person, death hovering above him.

“I don’t like his sats, but there’s not much to be done. Hopefully the steroids will help. I want him prone for an hour, twice a day, starting immediately,” Jon said, scribbling his orders. “See if that helps bump him up a bit while we give the steroids time to work. Have the fellow on-call page me if his sats don’t improve within the next . . .” Jon checked his watch. “Six hours.” Jon quickly signed off and replaced the chart, heading out the door.

Jo stopped him, and they both stared at each other, neither one speaking.

Finally, Jon said, “Take care of him for me.”

Jo nodded. “How’s Kai? It kills me I can’t be his nurse.”

Jon shook his head. “I haven’t seen him since this morning. I think he’s in more pain than he’s letting on, but he’s doing a little better.”

Jo smiled. “That sounds like the Kai I know. Tell him hi for me, will you?”

Jon walked slowly toward the waiting room, feeling this strange sense of distorted *deja vu*. Not since the last few weeks before Kai's transplant and those terrifying hours and days immediately afterward while they waited to see if Kai's body would reject his new lungs had Jon felt so unsettled, worried, as he had this past weekend.

Inez rose as soon as she saw Jon enter. "Dr. Taylor," she said, offering a tired, if warm smile. Her small hands clutched a cup of coffee, the steam slowly rising up. The room was empty right now, to Jon's relief, so he gestured for her to sit, then joined her. He towered over her, more than a foot, and this was news that needed to be delivered face to face, at eye level.

"Thank you for coming to see Martin. For talking with me. They told us you were away. We've been dealing with a Dr. Kainer mostly. He doesn't speak Spanish. I don't like him," Inez said in her quiet, rapid Spanish.

Jon's mouth twitched, but he forced his face to stay neutral. He'd known Inez and Martin a long time, and nearly all his FS patients knew Kai, or at least of him. Pulmonology was a small program, especially the area in which Jon specialized—CF, FS, severe asthma—nearly all the doctors, nurses, and patients knew each other. Some were even friends. An extension of the small-town atmosphere and Jon's inclusionary policies.

Jon didn't see the point in holding back. *"Kai's been sick. I took some time to be with him,"* he added in Spanish.

Inez laid a hand on Jon's forearm and spoke sincerely. *"Lo siento."*

Jon took a breath, nodded, readied to do one of the worst parts of his job: give bad news. *"How much did this Dr. Kainer tell you?"*

"Not much."

Jon sighed. *"Martin has something called allergic bronchopulmonary Aspergillosis, or ABPA. It means his lungs are reacting to a fungus that occurs in the air, naturally. We all breathe it in all the time, and normally, our bodies ignore it. But he's developed a sensitivity to it, so his immune system has gone into overdrive trying to eliminate it, as if it were a pathogen."*

Inez tried to maintain her calm, sipping from her coffee, but Jon could see her hands were shaking subtly. *"What does this mean?"*

"His body is producing more, thicker mucus, and he has a lot of inflammation in his lungs that are damaging the tissue and inhibiting his ability to get oxygen. I've started him on some steroids to try to help with the inflammation, and I'm going to have him moved onto his stomach for periods of time to help increase his oxygen saturation. If that doesn't help in the next few hours, I'll start him on an antifungal."

"But?"

Jon sighed; he'd hoped she wouldn't pick up on the inevitable "but." *"But ABPA is very serious. I'm going to treat him aggressively, but this isn't something we can cure, like a bacterial infection. Only manage. We're fighting his immune system, and the treatments mean he's at increased risk for secondary infections."* Jon took another breath, swallowed. *"It's also possible we may not be able to increase his pulmonary function sufficiently—"*

"Y que me está diciendo?!"

"I'm saying that I'm going to do everything I can for him. But you need to prepare yourself. . ."

Inez mumbled a slew of curses under her breath. "Then put him on the transplant list," she said, switching into English. The shift felt abrupt and strange to Jon's ears after the last fifteen minutes.

"You know I would if I could, Inez, but I don't have control over that."

Her face turned angry, hostile. "So you could pull the strings for your brother but not my son? He's fifteen. *Solamente quince años, doctor.* Please."

Jon shook his head. “The transplant committee ruled a few weeks ago that they wouldn’t allow any other FS patients to be listed until they could see that Kai had long-term benefits from the surgery.”

“*What do they need to wait for? Kai’s alive, isn’t he? You’re saying they would let my son die?*”

Jon had to look away, unable to meet Inez’s gaze, hating that he could do no more than what he was already.

“**You** would let him die?”

Vicky strode down the main hallway of the sixth floor of Jonesville Memorial, the pulmonary floor, toward the main nurse’s station. She normally didn’t venture out of the outpatient clinic wing, but there was a fellow she needed to track down—Kainer again—and she figured this would be a good place to start. She was surprised when she saw the slim, haggard form of Jon Taylor leaning on one of the counters, scribbling notes in a patient’s file.

She smiled secretly, shaking her head, as she approached. “I thought you were taking some time off.”

“I was. I am,” he said without looking up, seemingly not surprised to see her. “I had a few inpatients I had to check on. I’m actually just finishing up. I promised Kai I’d head back as soon as I was done.”

“Have you eaten?”

He sighed, signed off, and filed the chart. “You’re always feeding me.”

“Because someone has to,” she said playfully.

He finally looked up, his face tired and sad. Her eyebrows furrowed, but they were in public, and other than a “to be continued,” she wasn’t quite sure where “they” were, so she reigned it in.

“There’s a really great wrap place a few blocks away. Let’s get out of here for a little while.” She hoped Jon got the signal that she was so desperately trying to convey without actually saying it: *I know you’re not OK. Let’s go somewhere private and we’ll talk about it.*

He sighed, looked around, pushed his fingers through his hair. “Sure.”

Vicky settled into a corner table of the restaurant, which was moderately busy because it was so close to the hospital, even though it was hours past the peak lunch rush and too early for dinner. Jon was picking at his wrap, staring at the pieces of tortilla as they settled into a pile.

She glanced around; a few people in scrubs and white coats who’d also walked over for a bite, but no one from pulmonology or critical care, and they were partially shielded by a large potted palm, so Vicky grabbed the front of Jon’s shirt, pulling him toward her into a kiss. She kept it simple, but soon felt Jon’s tension melting away into the touch of their tongues as he deepened the kiss, his hands gripping her shoulders tightly, as if holding on for dear life.

Finally, he pulled away, resting his forehead against hers. “Martin may not make it. I had to tell his mother. She called me a hypocrite and a self-serving traitor.”

Vicky pulled back, pressing against Jon’s collarbone so she could study his face. “Inez said that?”

“Not in so many words,” Jon said, shaking his head, sinking down into his seat.

“Jon.”

Jon unfolded his wrap and stabbed at the contents with his fork. “I could have tried harder at the last transplant committee meeting to convince them that disallowing FS patients from being listed was a mistake.”

So that’s what this is about. She reached for his free hand, smiling faintly when he let her link her fingers in his. “You fought just as hard to convince the committee last month as you did when it was Kai’s life on the line. They’d already made their minds up long before you even walked into that meeting room.”

Jon sighed heavily. "Maybe. Doesn't make me feel any better."

"Whatever Inez said, I'm sure she didn't mean it. She's worried and upset and angry. You know what that's like more than anyone else in pulmonology. And she knows that. No matter what happens, she'll forgive you."

Jon nodded reluctantly and ate a few bites of food.

Vicky wanted to pull him close, tuck his head under her chin and just cradle him. Instead, she asked, "Kai's doing better?"

"He was having a bunch of tests today. I guess I'll find out after this." Jon shrugged and took a few bites of his mangled sandwich.

Vicky admired him for a moment. "You should keep the beard." After several days without shaving, Jon had the beginnings of a golden-brown beard framing his jaw, which, surprisingly, drew attention to his eyes.

He smoothed a palm over his cheek, as if realizing for the first time how long it'd been since he'd shaved. "Ugh. I must look like a caveman. No wonder Inez got angry."

Vicky let her own fingers trace a path along his jaw; the hair was unexpectedly soft. She smiled when his eyes closed and he leaned into her touch. She wanted to take his weariness, pain, stress away like she had so many times before. "I like it. I think you look sexy."

He choked out a skeptical laugh. "I can't keep it. My TB mask won't fit properly with facial hair."

Vicky frowned. "When was the last time you treated someone with tuberculosis anyway?"

Jon leaned back in his seat and tore off a piece of meat from his dissected sandwich. "A year? No. Longer. Two. We had a case come in about thirteen months ago, but that was when Kai was really sick, and I didn't want to take any chances, so I had MacDonald make sure someone else handled that patient." Jon popped the bite in his mouth and chewed thoughtfully. "Besides, TB is getting more common the more you have workers from the third world showing up in the county looking for jobs on ranches, farms, construction, the slaughterhouses. . . ."

Vicky smiled and watched Jon eat for a few minutes before digging into her own sandwich. It was nice, sharing this meal together, even when neither of them were talking. She noticed his knee would occasionally bump against hers. Jon had long legs, and at first, she thought it was an accident, but when it happened again, she glanced up, and he met her eyes with the suggestion of a smile glinting in his, though he kept eating and said nothing.

Vicky enjoyed seeing this playful side of Jon, to see that she could relax him and take his mind off his worries, even if it was only for a few fleeting minutes.

They were almost finished their meals when Vicky decided to say what had been on her mind for the past few days. "You probably don't remember, but my friend has that party . . ."

"The costume one," Jon said, nodding, balling up his wrapper and fishing out his glucose meter.

"Yeah. It's not this Friday, but next—the 22nd, I think. Look, with all that's going on with Kai and everything, I totally get if you want to back out. I did kind of force you into it, anyway."

It annoyed Vicky she couldn't see Jon's eyes, as he was focused on pricking his finger and testing his blood, but he managed a faint shrug. "You should know me well enough to know no one forces me into anything. Kai and I have that much in common, at least."

Vicky chuckled, found her heartbeat altering to a slow, chaotic rhythm when he finally looked up at her, a sweet, easy smile on his face unlike any she'd seen before.

"I don't like parties, but I'm going to need a diversion. As long as Kai's OK, I'll be there. I even have a costume."

Vicky's eyebrows rose. "Really."

Jon bit his lip, looking at her a little sheepishly. "Really."

Vicky let her laughter bubble out at last, her eyes sparkling. "That I have to see. So, if everything goes well, it's a date?"

Jon linked her fingers with his, nodded. "It's a date."

Nikki adjusted her breasts again, leaning forward to settle them in the leather push-up bra she hadn't worn in years. She smoothed her palm over her belly, along the top edge of her tattoo as it peeked above the waist of the skin-tight denim mini skirt she wore. She paused, glancing up at the flickering neon signs that decorated the outside of the bar, streaks of color reflecting in the polished chrome of rows of motorcycles parked out front. It'd been years since she'd come to the Hitchhiker, a biker bar she used to frequent when she first hit town and needed a few bucks, but it looked like nothing had changed. Even the bikes were the same.

After Kai kicked her out, she'd gone to the diner, hoping Marge would recant and let Nikki work a shift. But Marge had refused, telling Nikki she couldn't serve paying customers till her face stopped looking like she'd lost a fight with a door. Not sure what else to do with herself, Nikki had decided to sort through her stuff, seeing what she could sell at the pawn and consignment stores for a little extra cash, setting a few things aside in a bag for if she decided to run for it.

She'd stayed in Jonesville too long; it was a miracle Mark hadn't found her sooner. And though he'd disappeared for now, it was only a matter of time before he came for her again, and he wasn't dumb enough to be fooled by her tricks twice.

Nikki entered, the familiar scent of cigarette smoke, sweat, beer, and leather hitting her nose. She scanned the crowd as she headed toward the bar. She'd discovered the outfit she was currently wearing in the back of a drawer, a pack of matches with the Hitchhiker logo still in the pocket of the skirt. Unable to work and banned from Kai's visitor's list, she'd found her way here.

A gruff pair of guys were fighting over the jukebox, each apparently determined to let his selections dominate the night's soundtrack. Nikki ignored them, taking a seat a stool down from a lone guy sipping his beer and watching the fight, eyes lit up with hunger. Signaling the bartender, Nikki ordered a whiskey, double, straight up, and tossed it back with one burning gulp. The glass made a satisfying thud on the counter when she set it back down, drawing the onlooker's attention. She smiled.

"Got a cigarette? I quit, but I'd kill for a smoke right now."

He smiled, fished one out for her. She leaned forward to accept the flame from his lighter, pushing her hair out of the way, unintentionally revealing her bruised and scraped up face.

"Like it rough, huh?" he said, chuckling, lighting his own cigarette.

She leaned forward, squeezing her cleavage together. "Sometimes. When the mood strikes."

He grinned, exhaling smoke. "And what are you in the mood for tonight?"

It amazed her how easily she slipped back into the old routine, but his question made her answer reflexively in her head. What did she want? To forget. That made her heart clamp in her chest, and she found her hand imitating the sign Kai had showed her, fingers bent toward her palm as she passed it over her forehead, though she acted as if she were simply shifting her hair.

"Anything you want," she said. And if her smile was a little more forced this time, he didn't notice in the dim light of the bar.

Jon pinched his nose, as if doing so would squeeze out the headache that pressed behind his eyes. He was exhausted, having slept even less in the last week than normal. The logical part of his brain knew that Martin wasn't his fault, that nothing he could have done could have prevented the kid's immune system from turning on him. Knew that if the boy died, it had absolutely nothing to do with Jon and was simply the will of a malevolent God, if such a being even existed. That didn't change the fact that Jon felt he deserved everything the poor kid's mother had said to him, all the hurt and anger she'd vented only a few hours earlier.

He sighed. And Kai. His blood pressure was better—stable, but low—and no one seemed to know why. Gates wanted to keep Kai one more day in this unit, hoping he could go home, or at least move down to a regular floor the following day. To make matters worse, Kai's pain had apparently been so severe he'd convinced Gates to give him something strong to combat it, and had been in a narcotic-aided sleep for the past few hours, according to Kai's night-shift nurse. Jon smoothed the skin of Kai's hand with his thumb, watching his brother sleep. Kai hated narcotics; it took a higher dose than normal for the drugs to impact his pain, and the side effects hit him hard. Kai had to have been in more pain than Jon could fathom if he'd begged Gates for the drugs.

Kai's lids fluttered open groggily, his eyes surveying the room, the haze of the drugs hovering in his pupils. He attempted to wiggle his fingers in Jon's grip, and it came out uncoordinated. He stared at their hands, his gaze a bit unfocused.

"My hand funny," he said in an odd voice, his grammar equally off.

"Because you're drugged up the wazoo," Jon replied.

"Oh." Kai giggled. "Patch."

Jon nodded. "Fentanyl."

"My surgery. After. Nice." Kai smiled broadly.

Jon filled in the missing parts of Kai's sentences: after Kai's transplant, he'd been on fentanyl for a few days to help with severe thoracic pain post-surgery. "You're totally high." Jon laughed.

Kai's eyes suddenly widened. "My nose something in!"

Jon sighed, realizing Kai had reverted to ASL grammar, which was why he was barely making any sense. "Oxygen. Your sats dropped a bit on the opioid, but not enough to put you on the biPAP."

Kai attempted to touch his nose with his free hand, crossing his eyes, but after a few minutes, gave up. "I love you, Jon," Kai said after a while, his voice still carrying that childlike euphoric tone.

Kai rarely said anything like that; when he did go so far as to admit he loved Jon, it was usually in the context of an excuse or apology. *I love you, but I don't need a father*. Even if Kai wasn't entirely himself, it felt nice to hear it, especially today, after Martin. Especially since only a few days ago, Jon had come so close to losing him entirely.

"I love you, too. Why don't you try to get some sleep."

"OK!" Kai said, a little too enthusiastically. "You BEST brother," he added with a faint smile. Jon vaguely remembered his vocabulary list for the week; he hadn't gotten to meet with Megan much, but he'd still tried to practice when Kai was sleeping. The signs for *better* and *best* were derived from *good*, simply made with larger emphasis for the larger modifier. He chuckled at how that came through in Kai's tone.

Jon leaned in to smooth Kai's hair out of his face. "Take advantage of the chance to sleep while your pain's gone," Jon whispered.

Kai closed his eyes. "Pain bad yes. Drugs make me don't care."

"All right," Jon said, realizing conversation while Kai was like this wasn't going to go too far.

Kai's breathing slowed, and for a moment, Jon was convinced Kai'd drifted off again. But then he spoke, his voice small at first, unlike it had been since he'd woken. "Doctor tell me my leg **hurt**. Stand, walk again? Maybe not." His tone reminded Jon of that scared version of his brother he'd witnessed the day before, when the spasms had returned with a vengeance. Briefly, Jon wondered if maybe the effects of the narcotic were waning. Fentanyl was powerful, but not terribly long-acting. Jon opened his mouth to comment, offer some words of reassurance or comfort, but Kai spoke again, eyes still closed. "Don't tell Jon," Kai said, his tone changing again, disjointed, confused, almost like someone speaking in their sleep. "Don't worry him. 'Ll fine."

"Kai."

Kai murmured something else unintelligible, and after a few more minutes, it became clear he was asleep again.

Jon pulled his fingers through his hair, his stomach churning. He felt guilty, like he'd eavesdropped on someone else's conversation, like he'd read Kai's diary and accessed thoughts he normally would never have shared with Jon. The fact that Kai'd been speaking in ASL—the weakness and coordination problems of the drug cocktail's effects preventing him from actually signing—not to mention a level of brutal honesty Jon had never seen since reuniting with his brother—were more than proof of how out of it Kai really was. Would he remember telling Jon about his leg?

Jon sighed heavily, deciding if Kai didn't say anything, he'd feign ignorance. Jon felt like they'd grown a bit closer over the past couple days. Maybe it was an illusion woven out of drugs and pain and fear, but after seeing those marks on his brother's torso, knowing the truth about their mother, Jon couldn't afford to break Kai's fragile trust. If that meant pretending he didn't know about the verdict on Kai's legs, then that's what he'd do.

The guy from the bar—he told her to call him Frank; she told him to call her Monica—had wanted to dance, and so they were squeezed onto the portion of the bar set aside for the purpose, Nikki's thigh between his as they moved together. Frank responded immediately to her touch, his smile growing with each movement. It was almost too easy. All of this. It could have been the alcohol hitting her empty stomach, or the pervasive smoke that hung in the air, but Nikki's stomach turned, and she had to swallow carefully, keeping her own smile up.

Sure, I'm having fun. This is fun, her smile told him.

She closed her eyes, pretending to feel the music, moving her body sensually along with its beat, but her mind wandered, as it always did when she was *working*, her body on cruise control.

The scent of sweat and leather and smoke and cheap aftershave melted away as she was transported back months, to her apartment, to the first time she was with Kai.

Weeks had passed since she'd snuck her number into the palm of his hand in the alley behind the diner, and Nikki hadn't seen or heard from him, expecting she never would. But then he'd called one afternoon, his voice hesitant. It was adorable.

"N-nikki?"

He'd shown up at her door, looking uncertain as he leaned on his crutches. She'd loved the way his hands and arms had looked, helping to support his weight, not resisting the urge to stroke her palm along one strong forearm, beckoning him in.

He'd eased into her apartment warily, looking around nervously, as if deciding showing up at her door had been a mistake. Determined to keep him there, Nikki'd dove in head first, pushing him back against the closed front door and sliding her hands over his body, lingering on his crotch, grinning as she felt his heat bloom beneath her palm.

He'd stuttered out a protest through heaving breaths. "Nikki . . ."

As her hands wandered, she could feel something under his pants. Then, she hadn't known much about him, but when her fingers lingered a little too long on the outline of a strap she could feel beneath the fabric of his jeans, he'd sighed, pushed her away.

"This is a mistake," he'd said.

Instead of letting him go, she'd shaken her head, taken his crutches and laid them nearby, one by one, noting how he didn't resist, but one of his hands instinctively reached back for the wall, fingers splayed, supporting himself.

"You can walk without those, right?" she'd asked, gripping his free hand.

His eyes had darted to his crutches briefly, then to their hands, then to her eyes. She remembered how incredibly deep blue they'd seemed in that moment, like looking into an ocean where the water was so clear yet so deep you couldn't see the bottom, just infinite blue.

“Nikki—” he’d said, nervous, but he didn’t attempt to pull away from her or reach for his crutches.

“It’s OK,” she’d said with a genuine smile—God, when was the last time she’d done that?—offering her second hand for him to take.

His face had shifted through a myriad of emotions, and he’d seemed so fucking young in that instant, even though she’d known he had to be more than twenty. Finally, he’d pulled his hand away from the wall and linked it in hers. She’d seen a moment of hesitation as he found his balance before a shy smile of his own lit his face.

She’d helped him keep his balance the short distance to her bed, noticing his left leg didn’t bend and he used his right to compensate. Finally, she’d helped him turn—not the easiest feat she found—and pushed him down onto the mattress with a bounce. Then she’d sunk down to her knees and undid the button on his jeans before moving to his shoes.

“Nikki—” he’d tried again, but she’d ignored him, unlacing his shoes and quickly discovering his braces. He’d muttered a few more protests as she worked, but she’d shushed him, continuing until his feet were free, then rising, eyes on his pants. He’d been biting his lip adorably, smoothing one hand on his thigh in a nervous gesture. “I have—I wear—”

“It’s OK. Sex is much better naked, though. Don’t you think?” she’d winked, and the tension in his shoulders had eased as he broke into a comfortable smile, letting out his held breath.

She’d helped him out of his jeans—which wasn’t easy, revealing his full leg braces, the first time she’d ever seen them. She’d known he was nervous; he’d cracked a joke: “Sexy, aren’t they?” And they’d both laughed, though the truth was, she did find them sexy. Maybe it was the leather, the straps, the way the metal clearly supported his legs—she wasn’t sure she could articulate it—but it was probably that moment more than any other in which she knew, if Kai would have her, this wouldn’t be a one-time fling.

It was more than the braces; it was the fact that despite his obvious reluctance, he’d come to her, he was trusting her. And though he was nervous, her scent, her touch, was making and keeping him hard.

Once his braces, socks, and boxers were off and discarded, she’d reached for his shirt, but he’d stopped her this time, out right, no hesitation. Because he was so adamant, she’d let it go, encouraging him to pull himself back on the bed and stretch out. Then she’d given in to the luxury of exploring his body, starting with his feet—where he was actually ticklish—and guiding her hands up his calves, to his thighs, admiring how surprisingly light and soft the hair was there, even if it was flattened from the braces.

Her fingers had quickly found old, faded scars on his thighs, and she’d looked up, noticing he was watching her warily. She’d kissed each mark, feeling him tense. “What are these from?”

“Braces digging in. When I was a kid,” he’d said with effort as she turned her head and blew hot breath on his balls, causing his cock to jerk.

She’d grinned, slid her hands up, under his shirt, teasing the hem. She’d looked up, met his eyes, and licked his cock from base to tip.

He’d groaned, and finally pulled the shirt off, hesitating a moment before tossing it away. She’d immediately seen what he’d been trying to hide: a long—healed, but fresh—pink scar that ran vertically down the center of his chest, and the hint of two more crescent scars beneath each pec. He also had another fairly fresh one just northeast of his navel, a couple more faded marks near his collarbone, and a noticeable, pink, puckered indentation at the base of his neck.

She’d seen the inward pull of his stomach as he held his breath, waiting. She’d offered him a smile, gliding her fingers over his chest and abs just as she had his legs. Even with the scars, he was gorgeous, and she couldn’t wait to taste him, leaning forward and pulling her tongue up along his largest scar, kissing to the base of his neck, enjoying the way he’d finally released his held breath as his breathing grew harsher.

She'd kissed and licked each scar, asking him about them in turn until she'd felt she knew his body—at least superficially. He'd been too awed to touch her, so she'd finally placed his hands on her breasts, giving him the chance to explore her in turn as she ground against him.

Kai hadn't lasted long the first time, not that she could blame the poor guy. She'd known he wasn't a virgin, because of Becca's big mouth, for one. But he might as well have been, the way he sighed and moaned and arched into her touch, the way his breath hitched as she teased him with her tongue. It was clear no woman had spent time lingering over every muscle and scar. Being free meant Nikki now had that luxury, and Kai was delicious to both the eye and tongue. And so beautifully responsive, too.

When she'd finally taken his full length in her mouth, tonguing his slit with little flicks, he'd gasped and she'd felt hot, bitter warmth suddenly flood her mouth.

"Oh, shit, I—" he'd attempted to stammer, but his eyes were heavily lidded.

She'd swallowed, something she'd never done on the job, but had acquired a taste for since. At least with the right guy. Then licked her lips, crawling up alongside him, one leg draped over his. She'd grabbed his hand, guiding it along her skin until he got the hint and began to trace a delicate path with just his fingertips, making her entire body tingle.

Her own fingers tickled the base of his half-hard cock, hoping to stir it back to life: one advantage of his youth.

"Would you like me to fuck you?" she'd whispered, breath hot in his ear.

She hadn't waited for an answer before climbing on top of him and rubbing against his cock until it fully recovered and he was pressing on her hips, desperate for her to stop teasing him.

He'd kissed her, hard and urgent and wonderful every time she leaned forward. Kissing had never been something Nikki had gone for: it was too intimate, too risky. But fuck, Kai was a fantastic kisser. It was like all his quiet reserve, his shy hesitation, disappeared, leaving only raw passion, hunger. Kai had reminded her, that day, that sex could be more than two bodies moving together. That day, as he gripped her hips hard enough to leave bruises, Nikki had found something with Kai, even if it had taken her months to truly see it.

And now, as she gripped the condom as she climbed off Frank, she knew: whatever indescribable thing she and Kai had, she'd ruined it. Perhaps forever. An inevitable outcome, and she'd resisted him for weeks. Months.

Nikki hurriedly pulled her clothes back on, ignoring Frank, who was muttering something about her being a good fuck and could he call her. As she headed for the door, she spotted the cash on the dresser. Part of her wanted to leave it, disgusted with herself, but not taking it would make cheating on Kai all that much worse, and she could use the money to buy a bus ticket.

Fuck, she thought as she stepped into the cool night air. Had she ever been with anyone that the word "cheating" could have even come to mind?

Later, that night, in the shower, her skin red from water just shy of scalding and minutes of furious, futile scrubbing, freshly opened scabs bleeding until the water ran pale pink in rivulets down her body, Nikki realized the truth she'd known all along. The truth she'd tried, over the past couple weeks, to ignore.

She could never be what Kai needed.

Her arms wrapped around her, burning from the water's heat yet still shivering, Nikki leaned against the shower wall, propping herself up.

And for the first time in years, Nikki let herself cry.

September 15, 2000

Jon helped Vicky carry the last of the groceries in from her car. She'd called earlier and offered to pick up a few things they needed, mostly for Kai, now that he was back home—basics like Gatorade, ginger ale, and crackers, things he could tolerate on his queasy stomach and that would help keep his blood pressure stable.

"Thanks for this, Vicky," Jon said, setting the case of sports drink on the kitchen counter and unpacking one of the bags.

Vicky offered a moderate shrug as she began pulling items out of bags on her side of the kitchen. "How is he?"

Jon sighed. "Sleeping. Finally. I've been having a hard time keeping him hydrated. He can't keep much down."

Vicky paused in what she was doing to meet Jon's eyes, visibly confused, uncertain how Kai could have fallen asleep if he were as sick as Jon claimed.

"Phenergan injection."

Vicky nodded. One side effect of the antiemetic was drowsiness, but in this case, it was a benefit. Jon seemed tired, even more so than normal, floundering through the bags as if he'd forgotten what he was looking for. She stilled one hand with hers, then offered him the box of crackers, then straws. He smiled faintly, pushed some hair out of his face, holding it between his fingers for a moment. His eyes drifted to hers, and his smile sweetened, became more natural and relaxed, and he walked around the counter, pulling her into a tight embrace. For a moment, they just savored each other's touch, scent, company.

"Have you told him yet?" Vicky whispered.

Jon shook his head against the top of hers, sighing. "He's going through enough right now." Vicky nodded against him, then started to pull away, but he clung to her.

"I want you. So bad. Right now." He spoke into her hair, his voice low. "It's wrong, I know, but—" He pulled away so he could study her eyes. She loved his eyes. The many facets and shades of grays and blues and even subtle greens that made up each iris. The colors always seemed to be shifting, changing. Today his eyes were particularly gray, tired, sad. Suddenly, she knew why.

"It's been—" she started to say.

Jon nodded. "—a long time for me, yeah," he admitted, turning his head just enough to try and hide his blush.

"Me too."

That faint smile again, elusive and beautiful and something else she loved about him. He used a single, long finger to draw her chin toward him, touching his lips against hers. Lightly at first, as if testing her taste. Soon, he deepened the kiss, another of his slow, tender, savoring explorations that made her insides turn ridiculously gooey.

She'd known Jon cared deeply about his patients; she'd seen how devoted he was to his brother, but feeling the warmth of his body against hers, the way his arms both clung to and supported her, the way the kiss extended yet never grew stale. How it was heated, yet never demanding. Yes, she wanted him, too, even if it made her heart skip a few beats from both excitement and fear. But she savored these moments together, these kisses her body remembered as a pleasant, lingering tingle long after they ended.

This one was no different.

She found herself sighing into his mouth, leaning into him, her body craving more. What would his skin, beyond his mouth and cheek and neck taste like? Her hands smoothed along his sides, fingers tracing over ribs she could feel through the fabric of his shirt. He'd never been a heavy man, but he'd lost so much weight when Kai got sick, and he'd never really recovered.

Jon was used to being the caregiver. Doctor, older brother. Maybe what he really needed—wanted—was someone to take care of him. They pulled away, each breathing hard, smiling, noses brushing, ready for another long, deep kiss.

Then they heard the scream.

Vicky felt Jon's entire body tense. He straightened, but otherwise didn't move immediately.

"No! No! Please!" Kai was shouting, his voice tinged with pure, unfiltered terror.

Jon met Vicky's eyes briefly; she nodded, and he immediately dashed into Kai's bedroom.

"Please! I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." Kai's voice filtered out of the room briefly before the door shut Vicky out.

Kai's room was dark except for a small lamp, but Jon could see Kai moving restlessly in bed, still on his side the way Jon had left him. His shouts had turned more to mumbles, partially incoherent, partially a refrain of the same variations on apology and pleas that had drawn Jon to the room in the first place.

"Kai. Kai."

He didn't seem to hear. Apparently, he was still asleep. In the midst of a horrible nightmare, then. Jon could see, as he drew closer, the sheets soaked through with perspiration, his brother's breathing fast and shallow, his hands trembling where they clung to a pillow. Kai continued mumbling, as if he were pleading with someone in his dream, and Jon saw tears trace down his brother's cheeks.

Jon smoothed Kai's hair, trying to calm him, hoping to wake him, surprised when Kai flinched, shuddered, and began to sob in earnest, his words lost as his breathing grew harsher, strained. "Kai. Wake up. Wake up." Jon shook Kai's shoulder firmly a few times.

Finally, Kai's eyes snapped open, searching the room in a clear moment of lingering panic, his chest heaving, before finally seeing Jon. Although his body was still ratched up from the dream, Jon saw Kai blink, swallow, struggle to calm himself.

"Oh, God. It was so real," Kai muttered.

Jon smoothed Kai's arm cautiously, in case his brother was still on edge. "A bad reaction to the meds?"

Kai hesitated a moment, his eyes unfocused, before seeming to realize Jon had spoken to him. Finally, he shook his head.

Jon inhaled. "This have anything to do with those marks on your stomach?"

Kai's hand shifted from the pillow to his belly.

"Nikki lied for you about those when they admitted you. And I managed to sweep it under the rug. But I need to know, Kai. Should I be worried?"

Kai didn't answer immediately, still coming down from the adrenaline. "Been having nightmares. And . . . panic attacks." His eyes met Jon's. "Past few days, been OK. Probably the drugs."

Jon sighed. "And now that Gates has paired down your dosages . . ."

Kai nodded. "Saturday ago I see head doctor. Before . . ." Kai grunted. "Now now day?"

Jon noticed Kai's ASL grammar—*Last Saturday I saw a shrink. What day is today?*—but said nothing. "Friday."

"Shit. Tuesday. Phone?" Kai started to push himself up.

"Kai—"

The combination of a week in the hospital, plus muscle relaxants and Mexitil meant Kai didn't have the strength or coordination he normally had, and he soon sank back, his face pale. He groaned, covered his mouth.

Jon checked his watch. “Are you nauseous? It’s too early for more Phenergan.” He felt for Kai’s pulse. “You’re dehydrated. I’ll bring you some Gatorade. Sipping it might help the dizziness.” Jon started to rise, but Kai grabbed his wrist.

After a moment of silence, Jon attempted, crudely, “*We’ll talk when you’re feeling better.*”

Kai nodded and let Jon go.

Jon wanted to know more. Nightmares? Panic attacks? How long had this been going on, and Jon hadn’t noticed? Had he somehow slept—or worked—through Kai’s panicked screams night after night? Or had the drugs made Kai more likely to talk in his sleep?

Kai was in no condition for the deep conversation all of it required, for Jon to tell Kai the truth about their mother. That would all have to wait. At least Jon could be reassured to know that Kai was seeing someone. He gathered that Kai was supposed to have had another session earlier that week. Tuesday, the day he finally got out of ICU. He wasn’t sure if Kai would be well enough to leave the house for a couple more days. If Kai wasn’t up to it, maybe he’d let Jon speak to this psychiatrist, see if he could set something up for early in the week. Kai wouldn’t be able to drive for a while yet, but Jon could handle it. A few more days off wouldn’t kill him.

Jon was surprised to find Vicky bustling away in the kitchen—she’d put away their purchases and was chopping up vegetables, dumping some into a bubbling pot of water.

“Nightmare,” Jon explained when she looked up at him questioningly as he squeezed by her to grab a drink for Kai, along with a straw.

She frowned. “Soup,” she said, adding more veggies to the pot.

“For Kai?”

She nodded, stirred it a bit, heavily salting the water. “I’ll blend it once it’s cooked, so you get all the nutrients from the vegetables in a smooth broth. Little trick I picked up from my mom as a way to get my younger siblings and cousins to eat their veggies. I’m making it extra salty for him.”

Jon opened the bottle with a sharp flick of his wrist. “You didn’t have to do this.”

She shrugged. “He has to eat. It’s got a lot of nutrients, which he needs after a week of tube feedings and vomiting. And the salt will help his blood pressure. Plus, it’s vegan and easy on the stomach.”

“Thank you,” Jon said in a small voice, the ghost of a smile tipping his lips, though his eyes were weary and worried.

“When this is done, I’ll make some meals for you, so you can just throw them in the microwave when you need to eat.” She smiled. “You’re welcome.”

Normally, Renee loved her drafting lab. Most of her core classes focused on the future—computers—but this semester, she’d found a professor who valued the basics—traditional pencil-and-paper—and her hours in the lab were her favorite time of the week. Renee had never shared her younger brother’s innate raw talent for crafting beauty on a page. But drafting was like guided meditation. It helped focus and hone the scrambled thoughts and visions in her mind into something filled with carefully considered angles and lines. Renee often found a sort of zen while working on a blueprint, and could lose hours of time in crafting the perfect design, the image in her head flowing into the two-dimensional sketch as naturally as if she’d been drafting her entire life instead of only a few months.

But today, today her thoughts were jumbled, disordered, and she couldn’t seem to focus on even the simple project she’d selected for this afternoon. She laid her pencil down and scanned the room. The drafting lab was nearly empty, as it usually was on Friday afternoons, one of the reasons she liked to work at that time. Today, though, it felt creepy. Lonely. The rows of slanted metal tables with their dark, flexible lamps attached to the edges, hunched over like

grim appendages on lean skeletons. Rather than a haven, the room felt hostile, depressing, and Renee suddenly very much wanted human company.

After quickly gathering up her supplies, she jogged out to the benches that fronted the building. A cool wind blew, reminding everyone the last few weeks of summer were rapidly ending, and Renee shivered as she sunk down onto the nearest bench. In New Orleans, it wouldn't get cold until December. What was she doing here? Who was she kidding?

She pulled out her phone, staring at her recent calls, wondering if she should try Kai again. It'd been nearly a week, and she hadn't seen him in class or gotten a call. Hesitantly, she dialed. It rang once before immediately going to voicemail, as if his phone was shut off. She listened patiently to the familiar message, and this time, when Kai's recorded voice informed her to call his brother, Dr. Jon Taylor, if it was urgent, she copied the number into her notebook instead of immediately hanging up. She contemplated leaving a message, but before she could, it beeped.

"This user's voice message box is full. Please try again later."

Sighing, Renee hurriedly hit speeddial #3. Diane.

"Yeah?" Diane almost never answered the phone like a normal person, and it made Renee smile faintly.

"Please tell me you're nearby. I'm outside the MacMillan building." Though it was irrational, Renee scanned the crowd of students that walked past her, as she'd gotten in the habit of doing the past couple weeks. Searching for tall, lean, and muscled, a shock of golden hair glinting in sunlight. He wasn't there. He never was. In fact, she hadn't seen him since that morning in the bookstore nearly a week ago.

"Earth to Renee."

Renee blinked, sputtered out a quick apology.

"I was saying," Diane said with emphasis, "that I'm walking toward you. They can see that sulk from space."

Before Renee could respond, the phone clicked, and she could see Diane striding toward her, her multiple braids, each threaded with strips of ribbon, swinging as she went.

"Party, tonight. You're coming with. No argument," Diane commanded, pulling Renee to her feet.

Renee opened her mouth to make some kind of protest, but Diane was right; she needed a break, maybe even to get drunk and make out with some guy she wouldn't remember. Because if she couldn't remember, she wouldn't have to worry about analyzing how she felt about him and why. She'd struggled to forget Kai, but it hadn't worked, and the fact that he'd gone from seemingly persistent to just, well, gone, was troubling. Especially after Art had insisted that wasn't in Kai's character. Diane may have said—

"Stop it. You're doing it again."

Renee blinked. Swallowed. Tried to look innocent. "What?"

"Obsessing over a guy you kissed *once*. Fuck. What would you be like if he'd fucked you? Forget about him. I have it on good authority that there will be plenty of available—emotionally and otherwise—guys at this party tonight. So let's grab something overly caffeinated and plan out what we're wearing."

Kai lay on his side, one arm wrapped around a small bowl, just by his mouth, his other hand gripping the sheets. His eyes were half open, staring. Suddenly, his body jerked, and he threw up into the bowl, though it wasn't much more than mucus.

Jon took a seat on the edge of the bed, setting the bottle and straw aside temporarily and helping Kai clean his mouth. "You need to try to drink something. It'll help."

Kai groaned, but he opened his mouth for the straw when Jon offered it and took a few slow, careful sips. Neither brother spoke much as Jon helped Kai drink about half the bottle over the course of several minutes.

Kai still felt like the world was spinning, and nausea still hovered in the back of his mouth, but sipping like this, slowly, steadily, helped a little. When Jon set the bottle aside, Kai closed his eyes, expecting at any moment for his stomach to violently reject the liquid, but it didn't. Relieved, he opened his eyes.

"Someone's here?"

"Vicky. She brought the groceries. She's making you soup."

Kai groaned, knowing he'd have to eat later and not at all looking forward to it.

"*I wanted to show you something,*" Jon signed clunkily, but not badly, to Kai's surprise. Even with all that had been going on the past week, apparently Jon had still prioritized improving his ASL. It made Kai smile faintly.

Kai watched as Jon pulled a small square piece of stiff paper out of his pocket. He held it for a moment, staring at it, his expression unreadable, before offering it to Kai.

It was a photo, worn, faded, creased in places. Obviously from the '70s. Kai studied the people in it. A tall, thin man with strong arms and sharp features and shaggy, straw-colored hair and gray eyes dominated the shot. Beside him stood an equally tall woman, perhaps only a couple inches shorter, with long, thick, flowing golden hair and bright, intense, sea-green eyes. Her face held a look both determined and complex, like an encyclopedia of expression. The woman was visibly pregnant, at least six or seven months, her arms wrapped around her bulging belly. Between them stood a tall, lanky boy with platinum-blond hair and eyes that appeared nearly black in the lighting of the photo. He looked about seven, staring out at the camera as if trying to analyze how it worked.

Kai was surprised to find his vision blurring, and he had to blink rapidly to clear it. He'd seen a single smudged black-and-white photo in microfiche at the library from the newspaper article covering his parents' deaths, but that had been the only image of his parents he'd seen since they died. He'd barely remembered what they looked like, but studying the photo, he clearly saw elements of both their mother and father in Jon and himself. Kai had more his father's frame; Jon had taken his marginally slighter build from their mother. Jon had their father's eyes and hair, Kai, their mother's, along with her expressive face. Kai's eyes rested on the boy Jon, grinning reluctantly for the camera, surprised by how much they'd looked alike at that age, although Kai's hair had been darker, lightening as he grew, whereas Jon's had apparently been light and grown darker with age. Jon also seemed taller at age seven than Kai had been. The photo was obviously from when their mother was pregnant with Kai and Jon's diabetes hadn't yet been diagnosed.

Perhaps this was a bad shot. Perhaps that's one reason Jon had it, because it had been loose and not hung on the wall or displayed in an album. Perhaps there had been snapshots before and after that showed the young family beaming, eyes glinting, happy. But this one, even faded as it was, was sad, serious, each face haunted in its own way.

Jesus, Kai thought. "I look so much like her."

"You're a lot like her in more than looks," Jon said in a whisper.

"Tell me about her," Kai said drowsily.

Jon sighed, smoothed Kai's hair. "She was illusive, like you."

Kai let his eyes fall shut again, wondering if the world would stop spinning long enough to let him sleep. He focused on his brother's voice. Jon never talked about their parents, ever. Even when Kai asked, Jon always shut down, or found some way to change the subject. Kai had reunited with Jon years ago, and this was the first time he'd ever seen this photo. A photo Kai had never even known existed.

"She . . . was an actress. Before she married Dad. She . . . would sometimes act out bits of roles she'd played while she worked around the house. She especially loved Shakespeare. Ophelia was her favorite."

"She loved *Hamlet*?"

"I used to have that part—you know, where Ophelia's muttering about the herbs and what they stand for—memorized. Mom was always saying, 'there's rue for you, and here's some for me.'"

Kai heard his brother's voice hitch, and he was silent a long time.

"We need to talk. When you're up to it. Here. Finish this and take your meds. Try to get some more sleep," Jon said after several minutes of silence, offering Kai the straw.

Kai sipped obediently, trying to force his drug-addled, nauseated brain to think, remember. *Hamlet* was one of Kai's favorites, and he'd spent a lot of time when he was younger with his beat-up copy Art had given him, analyzing lines whose meanings had been lost to history, like Ophelia's herbs.

That Kai had shared his love for the play with his mother. . . . He wasn't sure what to think of it. For so many years, he'd distanced himself from his parents, shadowy figures that were almost as mythical as any fantastic creatures he read about in books. Now, he had a woman whom he looked like, with whom he shared more than golden hair and blue eyes.

Rue is for regret, Kai remembered. A poison.

An abortifacient.

Vicky watched Jon surreptitiously as she cooked; he was pacing back and forth, speaking in a low voice on his cell phone, his other hand twisting his hair anxiously. Jon was still technically off the clock, at least for a few more days while Kai recovered, so if he'd been paged—and he'd answered—it had to be Martin.

Jon was nodding now, his face serious; he'd dropped his hand so his hair remained tangled and sticking up. Not that Vicky liked Jon stressed and worried, but she loved seeing him like this, looking so very "Jon," and part of her wanted to turn down the heat on the stove and go to him, wrapping her arms around his waist, her cheek pressed up against his back.

A moment later, he ended the call and stood there, looking around, lost in thought, obviously, though he seemed more like a confused, addled tourist struggling to find the path. Finally, he sighed, pocketed his phone, and crossed to the bar that divided the kitchen from the rest of the apartment.

Jon laid his forearms on the counter, dropping his head, a heavy sigh echoing from the cavern he'd created with his body. "Martin's not responding to the steroids, and even though it's still early, the antifungal doesn't seem to be helping, either," Jon said, lifting his head just enough to make sure his voice wasn't muffled. "He's not worse, but he's not better, either." Jon pushed up, hands splayed on the counter. His face was haunted in a way Vicky hadn't seen it since the day, more than a year ago, when Jon had come to her to confess the realization that Kai's time was running out. It had come down to the wire for Kai, and Jon had been filled with such tragic despair of a kind Vicky had hoped she'd never see again.

Vicky shut the heat off the stove and crossed around to him, stroking his back, not saying anything, feeling his tension as she moved to his shoulders.

"I'm going to give him a few more days, then . . . then maybe I should consider stronger immunosuppression than steroids."

"Like the kind of meds Kai takes?"

Jon sighed, arched his shoulders into her touch. "Stronger."

"Like chemo? Jon . . ."

"I know," Jon said, defeated. "I could stop the reaction to the *Aspergillus* only to have him die from infection. Be lucky Inez doesn't sue me."

"You really think she would?"

"I don't know." Jon pulled away from her, crossing quickly to the couch and sinking down, letting his head fall back against the top of the sofa, his long legs stretched. "I don't know anything anymore."

Vicky followed, curling up beside him, her hand on his thigh. "Jon, you've had tough cases like this before, but. . ."

Jon nodded. Let his eyes slide shut. "I know. I think . . . it's this whole thing with Kai coinciding with Martin. . . . I mean, I *knew* it, but it's like this made it *real*, you know? That it's not over. I still could lose him any day." Jon covered his face, sweeping a hand into his hair. "Kai is all I have."

"Jon," Vicky attempted, smoothing down some of his hair. A part of her wanted to say, *What about me?* Instead, she asked, "What about your adoptive father?"

Jon let out a sound that may have been a laugh, but came out more as a cough. "What I have with him is a business relationship. He paid for me to go to the best schools, to become Doogie Howser," Jon said bitterly, "and I repay him by discovering a new disease and hopefully making brilliant medical breakthroughs so he can live vicariously and look good to his friends."

Vicky knew Jon loved his work, and genuinely wanted to help people. She also knew, as he'd reminded her only a couple days earlier, that no one could force him to do something he didn't want. Seeing him acting so cynically like this was disconcerting.

"If that's what he wants, why didn't he insist you take his name?"

Jon's hand moved blindly until it found Vicky's, at which point he laced his fingers in hers. "He felt my taking his name would dishonor his real son's memory."

Vicky knew Jon never spoke of his adoptive father, and Jon had never visited him as long as Vicky had known him, but she had no idea their relationship was so cold. No wonder Jon clung to his brother so intensely.

Vicky raised their hands to her lips and kissed his fingers. "I know you've treated Martin for years, but maybe you should surrender his care completely to someone else. It might be best for both of you."

Jon nodded weakly. "I know. I just . . . I feel like that would be giving up on him. And right now he needs someone who won't."

Jon spread his arm, beckoning her in closer. She loved these little invitations to physical affections, treasuring them. Jon hadn't said anything about what *they* were, but his body had spoken volumes, allowing touching and caresses that constantly took her by surprise.

She laid her head on his chest, listening to his quiet heartbeat pounding rhythmically. She could fall asleep like this, and as she felt his breathing slow, she realized so could he.

"Thanks for being the designated driver, Diane," Renee said, leaning back in the car seat. "I need to get 'Mardi Gras' drunk tonight."

Diane nodded. "Agreed. You need to drink and have fun and forget about that guy. What is it about him, anyway? Is he really just that good looking? Does he really kiss *that* well?" Diane grinned, casting a sideways glance at Renee, who was fiddling with the hem of her skirt, but didn't answer. "Because I've seen you fall fast and hard before, but nothing remotely like this."

Renee tucked a curl behind her ear. "It's not the way he looks. I mean, yeah, it is, but . . . it's more than that. I can't quite put my finger on it. His mystery, maybe?"

"You don't want those emo guys. Not in real life. They're fine to read about or watch on TV, but they'll just cause you trouble."

"And what, I'll poke my eye out?" Renee laughed, but her smile evaporated when she saw how serious Diane was.

Diane shook her head, sighed, then finally said, "The last real boyfriend I had was my senior year of high school. I was a goth back then—yeah, judge me." Diane tightened her grip on the steering wheel. "His parents were alcoholics, and he had to take care of his siblings on his own. He lived in a constant state of fear of losing them to CPS, so he was always covering for his parents."

Diane was quiet a long time, pensive. It was a side of her friend Renee rarely saw. Hesitantly, Renee asked, "What happened?"

Diane's eyes were fixed on the road when she answered, "He hanged himself."

"Jesus," Renee said, her hand going to her mouth.

"He was depressed. I mean, how couldn't you be in a situation like that? And I, stupidly, thought it was sexy." Diane laughed snidely. "One day while he was at work, CPS came and took his siblings away because his parents almost burned the house down. He didn't have any chance of getting custody, even though he was 18. I tried to help, but . . ." Diane shrugged and sighed. "I gave up the whole goth thing after he died. Why play at death when you've seen it?"

"Did you love him?"

Diane didn't answer for a long time. "Can you really love someone when you're seventeen?"

"We're only a couple years older now. Can we love now? What's the magical formula of age plus experience you need in order to love?"

Diane laughed, but it was sad, forced. "I'm an art major, not math. Give me a break. Tonight's not about love, anyway."

Renee was silent, staring down at her fingers, knotting them together.

"What?"

"Forget it. You're going to make fun of me and dismiss me and . . . just forget it."

Diane sighed, softened. "I shouldn't have told you that story. I don't know why I even did."

"No. That's not it. I mean, I'm glad you did. It's just—"

"This guy. It's always this guy."

"His name's Kai."

Diane braked hard. "Oh God. Don't tell me you're *in love* with him?! Jesus, Renee. You don't even know him."

Renee gritted her teeth, breathed. "No. I'm not saying that. I'm just saying . . ." Renee struggled to express herself, to make Diane understand that when she was with Kai, she felt . . . different. Almost like she were walking around as only a fraction of herself and he was the magic ingredient that made her feel whole. "Have you ever met someone that you just knew, instantly, you would be friends with them?"

Diane's brows furrowed as she searched the crowded street for a place to park. "Uh, I guess I kinda felt like that with you. Even if you were totally not what I was expecting."

"That's kinda how I feel about Kai. Only, not just friends. It's something I just *feel*. Know. It's why I can't stop thinking about him."

Diane parallel parked a few blocks down from the house where Renee could see the party was gathering and looked over at her friend. "Jesus. This isn't just a crush you can't kick, is it?" Renee shook her head. "I know it's not love, can't be love, yet. I'm not stupid. But . . . if love is like a house you build with someone, then being with Kai is like that moment you walk into a room and you suddenly see all the possibilities. You just know, that if you can just spend some time, it'll be the room you always dreamed of. And if that room is magic, you can't even fathom what the entire house will be like, if you only have the chance to experience it."

Diane smiled faintly at her friend. "OK. How about we go hit that rom-com double feature at the cineplex instead of this party?"

Renee beamed. "Really?"

Diane nodded. "And then we'll see about getting your guy—Kai—back."

September 18, 2000

Dr. Miller pretended to be making some final notes in paperwork as she let Kai get settled in for their second session. In reality, she was observing him surreptitiously. He looked simultaneously worse and better than he had a week ago. Clearly, he'd been sleeping, the purple bags gone, and he was clean shaven. But he seemed weary, groggy, his hair a little disheveled, his eyes droopy.

He sat in a compact blue wheelchair, dressed in a faded long-sleeve T-shirt and loose gym shorts; his feet were covered in what looked like two or three layers of socks, but no shoes. His left leg wasn't as muscular as his right, on which he wore a bulky black knee brace. He slouched, one hand on a pushrim, as if that was all that was keeping his upper body upright.

"You're welcome to the couch. Stretch out, lie down, if you'd like," Dr. Miller offered, setting down her pad and sipping some of her coffee.

He glanced over at the couch he had parked himself beside and shook his head. "I'll stay here for now," he said quietly.

Dr. Miller nodded. "So, how have you been feeling since we last spoke?"

Kai let out a weary laugh that almost sounded like air being released from a tire. "What do you think?"

Dr. Miller kept her gaze fixed on him, an eyebrow raised, patient.

After a moment, Kai sighed, started to lean forward, forearms on his legs, then winced and pushed back. "You talked to my brother?"

She nodded. Jon had called her Friday afternoon to explain, succinctly, why Kai had missed his Tuesday session, and to schedule today's visit. "He told me you were in the hospital last week."

Kai smoothed both hands over his face, covering it, elbows braced against his chest. He nodded slowly.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

Kai didn't respond for a long while, not moving except for the slight rise and fall of his shoulders with each breath, his hands still masking his face. "No. Maybe," he hedged.

Miller contained her sigh, shifted her legs so the opposite was crossed over the other, her ankle bobbing. "How has your mood been since I saw you last?" she asked instead, hoping shifting gears would help.

She heard a harsh breath of air blow against the palm of his hands, and he let them fall away. "I've been drugged up the ass," he said. His face was almost devoid of expression, but unlike a week ago, it didn't seem intentional, but rather, as if he were simply too tired to show any emotion there. Like it was too much effort.

Miller nodded, giving him a chance to elaborate.

Kai sighed, realizing what she was doing. He closed his eyes for a moment, as if thinking, before opening them again. "But I've been all over the place," he admitted finally. He glanced over at the couch, leaned slightly, flicked off his brake, and wheeled himself backwards until he lined up roughly parallel. He shifted the brake back on, took a breath, and lifted his body carefully out of the wheelchair and onto the couch, taking extra care with his injured leg, his skin paling and face scrunching up subtly as he moved.

Miller noted the brace kept Kai's right knee locked at a ninety-degree angle, and that the tone in his left leg was low, his foot floppy at the ankle, his knee loose. It took Kai several more minutes to arrange his legs, tenting a pillow beneath them before lying back with an audible sigh.

"Please don't make me move for an hour," Kai said in an indeterminate tone.

Miller chuckled softly and sipped more coffee. "Tell me how your mood has been the past week."

Kai swallowed; his eyes drifted closed. "I freaked out my first day awake." Miller could see Kai was gritting his teeth, the hinge of his jaw working. "I was fucking terrified, panicking, and I let it show."

"What happened?"

Kai took a breath, and a finger moved to a strap on his brace, dragging his nails on the velcro. "I don't remember that well. They put me out with milk of amnesia, and I was already pretty stoned."

"Kai, I think this is important. Tell me what you remember. Even if it's only how you felt."

Kai scraped his nails on the velcro repeatedly, and Miller realized Kai wasn't wearing a rubber band; his hands apparently weren't sure what to do with the nervous energy. "One of the drugs . . . it makes me really sick. Dizzy, nauseous. And . . ." The velcro ripping sound grew as Kai started tearing off part of the strap and replacing it, his breathing increasing, his anxiety blooming.

"Relax, Kai. Safe space."

Kai forced himself to take a few slow breaths, buried his hands under his butt. "My legs started spasming again. I . . ." Kai swallowed. "I can handle pain. I haven't gone a single day of my conscious life without pain. Mostly without drugs. I *know* pain . . ."

Dr. Miller noted how Kai seemed so proud of his pain tolerance, yet clearly defensive. But it was telling: chronic pain, especially over a lifetime, could cause depression, anxiety. Dr. Miller doubted it was the root of Kai's problems, but it certainly could exacerbate it. She wrote *chronic pain*, underlining it.

"But . . ." Kai squeezed his eyes tightly shut. "I was in *so much* pain. Pain like I've never felt before. . . . And it pushed me over the edge." Kai's chest heaved as his breathing grew more ragged.

"It's all right, Kai. No one's judging you here. Tell me how you remember feeling."

"Hurting. I was hurting so bad. And I was so nauseous. And dizzy, like the room was spinning around me. And confused. And . . . terrified. So fucking terrified." Kai stumbled on the final words, hyperventilating now.

"Kai, relax. Stay with me. You're safe here. Deep, slow breaths. Come on. In," Miller counted in her mind a slow five seconds, then prompted him to exhale. She repeated the process a few times, until he seemed to have relaxed a bit. "Why were you so afraid?"

Kai shook his head. "I don't know. It was like the day before I came to you the first time. Overwhelming. Pure fear and panic." Kai's nails scraped against the velcro again, almost as if he had an itch he were trying to scratch through the thick fabric of the brace. "I—I was terrified they'd put me out and Jon would leave me. Fuck. It doesn't make any fucking sense." Dr. Miller could hear the creak of Kai's teeth and jaw as he ground them. "I freaked. I acted like a fucking child."

Dr. Miller scribbled a few lines, making notes about Kai's sense that emotions were overwhelming. She wrote, *fear of being alone? control??* and boxed it in, hesitated a moment, then added, *BPD?* It was far too early to say, but so far Kai seemed like a potentially classic case of Borderline Personality Disorder. "Those seem like legitimate fears. That's a scary situation."

"You don't understand," Kai ground out, turning his head toward her. "I don't . . ." He took a few breaths as he struggled to figure out how to express himself. "Do you know how many times I've been hospitalized?" Without giving her a chance to answer, he continued, "Neither do I. I lost count years ago. Point is. None of this is really new. I've dealt with severe MLS flare ups before. Alone. My first two years of high school were basically one long attack." Kai cradled his left wrist on his stomach, his right fingers picking at the skin as if trying to find an outlet for his anxiety, as if searching for the rubber band that wasn't there.

Miller rose, went to her desk, and fished out a couple foam stress balls. Crossing to the couch, she offered them to Kai.

He stared up at her, confused.

“Take them. Pull them apart if you want. I’d rather you do it to these than yourself.”

Kai looked at his wrist, which was red, scratched and irritated from his nervous tic. He frowned, accepting the balls, squeezing them in each hand before letting one rest in the curve of his stomach and proceeding to tear apart the other.

Dr. Miller retook her seat, watching as little bits of foam snowed down on Kai’s belly. “You went through all that alone because you had to. But you’re not alone anymore, Kai. You have your brother. And you have friends?”

“No,” Kai said in a distant voice. His eyes staring up vacantly at the ceiling while his fingers continued to work on destroying the ball.

“No friends?”

Kai sighed. “Growing up, my only real friend was David, my roommate at County House. But he was a year-and-a-half older, even though we were in the same grade, and when he aged out, he disappeared. We didn’t go to the same school anymore, and I didn’t exactly have the ability to go searching for him. I haven’t seen him in probably six years.”

“And there’s no one else?”

“Jake. My friend from the hearing high school. He was there for me during a lot of the time pre-transplant. But he’s in med school now in Chicago. We talk on the phone some, but I miss signing with him. It’s not the same.”

The chunks of foam Kai was pulling off the ball were growing larger. A few more minutes, and the first ball would be unrecognizable.

“What about a girlfriend?”

Kai let out a laugh that sounded more like a sob and turned his head away, toward the back of the couch. “Nikki. I kicked her out. I haven’t seen her since.”

Interesting. Dr. Miller scribbled that down, noting *relationship problems?*, also boxing that in. “Why?”

Kai shook his head, squeezed the remaining intact ball hard in one fist. “I was in a lot of pain, and angry. So angry, because of my leg.”

“What about your leg?” Dr. Miller probed. The brace suggested he’d injured it, but it would be good for Kai to talk about this, his body language—fist clamped tight around the stress ball, tension in his shoulders—suggested lingering frustration.

“My right leg has always been my ‘good’ leg. I spent the months after my transplant getting my strength back, building up my muscles, working with the control I do have so I could walk almost unaided.” Kai closed his eyes, threw the intact ball hard against the far wall. “Fucking worked against me. My hamstrings and quads fought, and because my hamstrings were stronger, they won.” Kai’s breath grew a bit jagged; he blinked furiously. “I may not walk or stand ever again. And I know it shouldn’t bother me, because I could be dead right now and the glass is fucking half full and all that, but Nikki’s gone, and I can’t talk to Jon about any of this and I’m just so . . .” Kai broke down, covering his mouth so the rest of his words came out muted. “Fucking alone. And I fucking hate myself for feeling like this, because ‘alone’ is all I’ve known for most of my life. Fuck.” His palms covered his face, his chest jerking as he cried, swearing at himself.

Dr. Miller pulled some tissues from the box on the table beside her and stuck them in Kai’s hand, not saying anything immediately, giving him some time. She observed how shame and guilt rode along with nearly all his emotions. As if he couldn’t allow himself to express any emotion too strongly, and if he did, he felt as if he’d failed some ridiculous test. It was likely there was more in Kai’s past that she didn’t yet know, perhaps relating to the other nightmare he’d been shell shocked about during their last meeting, and which she still needed to probe him about later if they had time.

“Why can’t you talk to your brother, Kai?”

Kai sucked in a few steadying breaths, blew his nose and wiped his eyes. “Because Jon has a messiah complex. He thinks it’s up to him to save the world. He . . . cares too much.”

“How can you ‘care too much’?” Dr. Miller asked.

“Jon takes failure personally, even if it’s not in his control. Everything that happened to me while we were separated? He blames himself for. And he doesn’t fucking know the half of it,” Kai said bitterly. “This attack? He hasn’t said it, but I know he’s been feeling guilty about it. He hasn’t worked, other than to treat a few inpatients, in more than a week. Even when I was waiting for my transplant, I know he worked part time.”

“It’s not good that he’s taken time off to help you through this?”

Kai sighed, frustrated. “Of course it is. Fuck, I don’t like to admit it, but I don’t know what I would have done without him these past few days. But—”

“Everyone needs someone sometimes, Kai.”

“It’s not that. It’s—” Kai struggled to explain himself. “You weren’t there. You didn’t. . . . I screamed and cried and pleaded for him like I was still six-years-old, terrified I’d never see him again. I . . . I don’t let Jon see me like that.”

“Why?”

“Because . . . because I’m not a kid anymore. Because I don’t want him to think I am. Because . . . because I don’t want him to worry about me.”

“You don’t want him to treat you like a child, yet you’re treating him that way.”

Kai pushed himself up awkwardly onto his elbows so he could see her better, his face confused and surprised. Bits of stress ball floated to the ground.

“Would you want your brother keeping things from you to ‘protect’ you? Wouldn’t that be patronizing? Condescending?”

Kai blinked, baffled.

“I do think you love your brother and genuinely want to shelter him. But do you want to know who I think you’re really protecting?”

Kai dropped back down, staring up again at the ceiling almost unblinking. Finally, he nodded.

“The nightmares. Have you had any the past week?”

Kai swallowed. “Too drugged up in the hospital. They started again once I got home and my dosages were paired back.”

“As bad as before? You seem tired, but not as desperately sleep deprived as you were last week.”

Kai laughed, flicked the remaining bits of foam off his stomach. “Drugs. Drugs to keep my muscles from spasming. Drugs to keep them from locking when they do. Drugs to keep me from throwing up because of the other drugs. Honestly not sure how I’m even awake right now, and not hurling on your couch.” His tone was light, self-deprecating, but weary. “When they wear off, that’s when the nightmares come. The same ones. I woke up screaming the other day, a few hours after I got home from the hospital. Thank God Jon didn’t ask what I’d dreamt about.”

Dr. Miller shifted her weight. “I want you to tell me about the other nightmare. The one you didn’t want to talk about last time.”

Kai took in a breath, held it. She saw a few tears trail down his cheeks he didn’t bother to hide or wipe away, though he kept his gaze fixed on the ceiling. “Sometimes I wish I could get high instead of sick from drugs like morphine or Valium. Only drug that ever really made me that way is the patch.”

“Fentanyl?”

Kai pressed the heels of his palms into his eyes. “I begged for that, in the hospital, the day Nikki and I fought. The pain was that bad, but . . . but after she left I needed to get out of my head for a while. I don’t remember the rest of that day. I nicknamed her ‘Forget,’ you know? It’s

a sign language thing. Sometimes all I want to do is forget. Forget the last twenty-two years and just . . . start over. But there is no starting over, is there? Ever?"

Dr. Miller took a careful breath, then responded, "We're all a product of our pasts. Bad and good."

"What if there's more bad than good?"

"Tell me about this other nightmare, Kai."

Kai choked out a laugh. "I guess better to do it when I'm doped up on muscle relaxants so I don't go full-out panic attack on you, huh?" He smoothed his hands over his arms, dragging his fingernails over them, almost like a junkie hungering for his next fix.

Dr. Miller set down her pad and pen, rose, and crossed to her filing cabinet. She opened the bottom drawer, sorted through it, before finally pulling out what she'd been looking for. It was an old, worn, thin T-shirt she'd originally intended to tear up for cleaning cloths. She offered it to Kai.

He stared up at her, warily, the fingers of one hand teasing at the edge of the fabric. Dr. Miller found a loose string and pulled; it made a satisfying tearing noise. Kai didn't quite smile, but a relieved look passed fleetingly through his eyes and he seized the material.

Dr. Miller returned to her seat, watching as Kai wrapped the fabric around one hand, pulling it tight, before releasing it again and repeating.

"For almost three months, the summer I turned ten, I lived with a woman named Julia Taylor." Kai pulled the fabric through his hands, giving them something to do that wasn't self-destructive. "She said she was my father's sister, that she'd been out of the country for years and had only just learned of my parents' deaths." Kai stretched the fabric and picked at it, his eyes still staring up at the ceiling. "It was kind of nice at first. Living in a real house, being the only kid. Even if she didn't know sign language. I was used to that, since only one staff member really knew it at County House, and only a little." Kai paused for a long while. "My breathing was good, then, relatively. My MLS, not so much, but . . ." Kai shook his head, clasped his hands together; they were trembling subtly. "I can't."

"I'm not trying to force you, Kai. But I think this is important. Why don't you tell me about the nightmare itself. Maybe that would help."

"It's so real, though," Kai said in a whisper. He took a few breaths, clearly trying to calm himself. He'd tied the fabric around one wrist, pulling on the other end. Occasionally, it'd rip. "In the nightmares, it's like I'm ten again. Living in her house. I'm terrified, because she's angry at me. So, so angry. That part of the dream changes, but usually it's because I threw up on her shoes." Kai laughed snidely.

"Did that really happen?"

Kai twisted the shreds of fabric around his fingers so tightly he threatened to cut off the blood supply. "Yes."

Dr. Miller scribbled a few notes, but gave Kai time to elaborate.

"It's . . . I don't . . . I don't talk about this. Ever. To anyone."

"I'm not here to judge you, remember. And this is all confidential."

Kai choked out a weak laugh. "It's not that," he said, tearing at the fabric. "It's . . ." He took a deep breath, bit his lip, struggling to explain. "In the nightmares, I'm ten. Everything that terrified me then is real again. Sometimes, it takes me thirty minutes to come out of it, to escape the panic, and realize I'm not that scared kid anymore. And when I do, when I think about it now, it's . . . embarrassing."

"Why is it embarrassing?"

"That I let her do what she did. That I was so scared . . . not of her, but that she—" Kai's breathing suddenly shifted into nearly full hyperventilation, his eyes squeezed tight. A few moments passed, and then he admitted, "I want to cut myself so bad right now." He began tearing the fabric in earnest, his hands shaking. "And I hate that I can't even talk about this

without feeling that way, and that makes me want to cut more, and—" Kai was gasping for air now.

Dr. Miller offered him a paper bag she'd left out in case he needed it.

After a few minutes of breathing into the bag, he calmed, though he was still shaken up. Dr. Miller wasn't sure what exactly had triggered the mini panic attack—if it was the memory of the nightmare, of whatever things he had gone through with this woman, or his obvious overwhelming shame of how deeply it had all affected him. Likely, it was some combination.

"It's all right, Kai. Talk to me."

He nodded, took a few steady breaths. "She starved me." He winced, clearly ashamed to admit it.

"Starved you?"

Kai turned his head away to hide his face. "I couldn't talk, not until I hit puberty. Not wouldn't, *couldn't*. But many people assumed I was just stubborn. Or retarded." Kai paused for a long time; when he finally spoke again, his words were tinged with tears, even if he still had his face turned away. "Every day, she'd ask me, 'Are you hungry?' When a nod wouldn't suffice, I'd sign, '*I'm hungry*.'" Kai signed as he spoke, as if to demonstrate. "She'd slap my hands down and tell me to ask for my food, to speak, like a 'good boy.' But I couldn't. I *couldn't*, so she made me sit and watch her eat. Every meal. Every day." Kai wrapped his arms around himself, as if trying to hug away the bad memory.

"She never let you eat? How did you survive a whole summer?"

"At first, I was always hungry, so I raided the pantry and fridge while she was at work. David and I used to do that at County House all the time. He'd go for salty food, I'd go for anything that could remotely pass for dessert."

"And that worked?"

Kai finally turned his head toward her; his eyes were red and puffy. "No. She got pissed. That was the first time she locked me in the bathroom."

Dr. Miller scribbled a few notes, especially noting how seemingly disaffected Kai spoke the last few sentences. She recognized one of his coping strategies: minimize what happened, act like it wasn't a big deal, and maybe he could convince himself that was true.

"I learned my lesson; I was supposed to clean up after her, so I ate whatever she left when she wasn't around. I learned what I could eat during the day that she wouldn't notice, like a slice or two of bread from the middle of the loaf, once a week. A handful of cereal a day. Stuff like that. After a couple weeks, I stopped being hungry most of the time. I also stopped trying to communicate with her; she'd ignore my signing, or even my gestures, berate me for not talking. So I just . . . stopped."

"Let's go back to the dream," Dr. Miller said, scribbling, "*I just stopped*" in her notes, boxing it in. "She was angry because you threw up on her shoes?"

Kai held the tattered T-shirt spread out on his belly, picking at it with one hand. "She was always angry at me for something. Because I didn't talk. I was too quiet. I cried too much. I fell too often. Because I was disgusting and annoying and . . ." Kai shook his head. "I threw up a lot. My stomach has always been . . . testy, and eating so little all the time. . . . It got used to being empty, I guess."

"What happened when you threw up?"

Kai shrugged. "I'm an idiot. For letting this upset me. It's not that big a deal." There it was again: minimizing the situation as a way to avoid talking about it. Basically, the "I'm fine; nothing to see here. Move along" defensive strategy. Coupled with his fears about opening himself to his brother, Dr. Miller presumed it was Kai's *modus operandi*. She jotted that down.

Kai pushed himself up, partially using the back of the couch to pull his torso up. He gripped it with one arm while he used the other to slip the pillow out from under his legs, wincing slightly as his bad leg was jostled. Then he used his hands to lift his legs, one by one, off the couch, until he was sitting facing her.

"Kai, fear isn't rational. It can sometimes help to talk about it that way, but telling someone with arachnophobia 'spiders aren't a big deal; they can't hurt you' isn't going to change the way their heart races out of control every time they see one."

Kai deflated, his shoulders sinking, recognizing she'd seen through him.

"This woman—your aunt—may have invalidated your feelings, and now, as an adult, with all your life experiences under your belt, it's easy to look at that boy and be ashamed to have ever been him, to have felt his fears. But you've said so yourself: in these nightmares, you *are* him. His fears are your fears. They're real. Just as we were once afraid of the dark, and it can be hard for us to remember and understand it as an adult, doesn't mean we were stupid for feeling that way then. And just as we learn to forget what it was like to be terrified of darkness, we need to find a way to help you move past everything that scared that ten-year-old you, that's still giving you nightmares and panic attacks."

Kai nodded weakly. His chin trembled. "I believed her, when she said I was stupid, or worthless, or lazy. That I was bad. I let her yell at me and starve me and take my mobility." He swallowed, hung his head. "Because I was so afraid. So paralyzingly afraid, that I would have nowhere to go, that no one—" Kai's voice broke, his shoulders shook. "—else could possibly want me if she decided she didn't."

Dr. Miller was almost thrown back in her chair. She hadn't expected to get to the heart of the matter so soon, especially at the end of a tough session. But there it was: fear of abandonment, of being alone—perfectly legitimate considering his background—but that inched her one step closer to the diagnosis of BPD.

"It's all right," Dr. Miller said in an encouraging voice, offering Kai some tissues. "I think you made some really good progress today."

Kai nodded, wiped his face, his fingers playing on the ratty T-shirt in his lap, which had stuck to the Velcro of his brace. "I must look like I cried for the last hour," Kai said, peeling off the rag and laying it aside in a strange, almost reverential way. He pulled his wheelchair closer, transferring into it, arranging his legs and feet with his hands. "Jon must think I'm insane. . . . I guess I am."

"I get the feeling your brother cares deeply about you, and nothing you could say to him would change that. Consider what we discussed earlier in the session. Talking to him might help."

Kai smiled, one of his contrived grins that looked deceptively genuine. "We'll see."

September 22, 2000

Kai transferred carefully from his bed to his chair, hissing harshly as the movement jostled his still-sore right thigh, even though the brace he wore kept his knee relatively immobile. His leg was already aching from the morning stretches he'd been ordered to do, and shoving his legs into jeans. Something that normally took him only a few minutes—even when his legs were being particularly stiff and stubborn—had stretched into nearly a half-hour, during which Kai had seriously debated skipping yet one more day of class.

How long had it been? He tried to remember. The Friday before the severe MLS attack, he'd gone to two of three classes. But he'd missed several before that. Fuck. Jon was right. Kai was kidding himself. Still, he was determined to keep going. It was largely his innate stubbornness, a trait that had always served him well in the past. But also, it was a matter of practicality. If he dropped the semester's classes, what would he do with himself? Get a job? He laughed hollowly as he slowly pushed across the room toward his closet, his back speaking loudly, making sure to remind him that it could ache just as badly as his leg.

If he couldn't even handle four classes, how could he manage a job? What employer would be flexible enough to put up with him? Art would. But Renee worked at Lost Apple, and that would be even worse than having class together three days a week. At least there, they were cushioned by a huge lecture hall, her in the back, him at the front. They'd never have to talk, or even really see each other, if that's what she wanted. And of course she didn't want anything to do with him. Who could blame her? Even if Kai worked only the days Renee didn't. . . .

He sighed, staring into his closet. All his button-ups and polos—the shirts he normally wore, were on the top rack. Ironically, he'd only put them there a few weeks ago, out of stupidity or maybe just hubris. With his long arms, he could reach up and pull one off the hanger, but instead, he dug into the bottom row of T-shirts, finding one squirreled into the back, hidden behind the ones he normally wore to workout or when he wasn't leaving the apartment.

At one time it had been black, but years of wear had faded its fabric to a steely charcoal gray. He studied the cracked white print on the front, handshapes he remembered well. Together, they said, roughly, in ASL, "*If you can't read this, fuck you.*" Kai laughed as he shook it out and pulled it on. The shirt had been a gift from his County House roomie, David, freshman year of high school. David had been in charge of a school fundraiser to print shirts to sell, and the printer, being ignorant of ASL, had filled the order. Of course, it didn't take long for the administration to discover David's design and confiscate the shirts, but not before a few had made their way into the hands of students and friends. Kai had worn the shirt at least once a week throughout his term at the hearing high school, and feeling the soft fabric against his skin brought back a lot of memories. When he was younger, the shirt had always hung loosely on his frame, but now he'd apparently outgrown it, the fabric clinging tightly around his chest and biceps. It wasn't uncomfortable, just odd, so Kai pushed his way toward the mirror to check his reflection. To see himself wearing it one last time before he folded it away with his other boxed-up memories.

He blinked at the man he saw before him, who had his same golden hair (even if it had gotten a little shaggy) and deep, sea-blue eyes. But he was strong and well muscled, the T-shirt defining a chest and arms Kai'd been so used to hiding he didn't recognize them. Instead of growing out of the old tee, he'd grown *into* it.

His eyes moved to the ugly, pink, puckered scar just north of his clavicle, visible above the collar of the shirt, touching it with the tips of his fingers. A knock on his bedroom door distracted him, and he turned away from the mirror to see Jon, looking concerned.

"You OK? I made you some breakfast. You should eat before we go."

Although Gates had tapered Kai off most of the drugs (and the drugs to combat the side effects of the other meds), the effects of the Mexitil still lingered, and Kai was still taking more Valium than he normally would, meaning driving was off the table for at least another week.

Before Kai could answer, Jon took a look at the shirt, studying the signs for a moment. "Does that say what I think it does?"

Kai offered a faint smile before pushing past his brother toward the kitchen. The smell of fried eggs and toast, plus Jon's dark roast hit his nostrils, and he drifted to the table, nausea suddenly hitting him. He felt Jon's hand on his shoulder.

"Just plain toast and scrambled eggs. You have to eat," Jon said, his voice soft. Kai nodded, closed his eyes and tried to push the nausea away. Sometimes eating helped. It wasn't easy to do, but once he'd done it, he felt better.

A few minutes later, Jon sat across from him, munching his own eggs and drinking coffee, reading the latest copy of *CHEST*, although Kai could tell Jon was actually watching to make sure Kai was eating.

"Turnabout's fairplay, I guess," Kai muttered under his breath.

"What?"

"I said, 'this is salty,'" Kai said, forcing some more food into his mouth.

"I know. But Gates and your nephrologist are worried about your blood pressure being too low. A little extra salt helps."

It was an argument they'd had nearly every day since Kai had been released from the hospital, and before his brother could ask the inevitable question, Kai hurried to respond, "105/70."

Jon let out a kind of grunt, but said nothing else, thankfully. Kai was genuinely grateful for all the time Jon had taken off the past couple weeks, honestly not entirely sure how he would have made it through without his brother. Still, Jon tended to helicopter.

"I have rounds most of the day, but if you need me, I'm just a call away. I'll come get you, or if I can't, I'll send someone, like Vicky. OK?"

Kai's instinct was to immediately reply that he was fine; his hand even started to go to his chest to make the sign, but he stopped himself. He wasn't fine. He probably never had been fine. And, if he were honest with himself, fine was a long, perhaps impossible way off. So, instead, Kai nodded, managing a hint of a smile.

Kai had survived world history, in which he'd struggled to follow Professor Miller's lecture on Hannibal and his war elephants. Kai wondered how Hannibal could have been stupid enough to think he could have taken elephants through the Alps, a ridiculous and daunting proposition. Then he looked at himself, knowing he'd likely have to withdraw or fail most of his classes, and suddenly he could understand. Sometimes, when you start out to do something, you don't realize how impossible it is. It isn't until you're suddenly freezing to death amongst a herd of dead elephants that you realize what an asshole you are.

English comp had involved spending time brainstorming for their first big writing assignment of the semester, a two- to five-page essay on "What I hope for the future," and which Kai could describe in one sentence fragment, "Not be sick." Somehow, he doubted his professor would appreciate his succinctness, even if brevity is the soul of wit.

One good thing about being so sick, drugged up, nauseous, and dizzy for the past two weeks meant he hadn't had a lot of time to think. Now he had fifty minutes to be inside his head, that terrifying place he'd been happy to avoid. Although brainstorming what he hoped for his future was better than focusing on the increasing pain in his back and legs. He still couldn't take more than Tylenol, which wasn't much better than nothing at all.

Or remembering he had no chance with Renee, and that he'd pushed Nikki out of his life. And he still had one more class after this. He linked his hands, raised them over his head and stretched, making an effort to ease the ache in his lower left back. He may have also taken the

chance to dip his head back, straining to see up the rows of seats toward the back, where Renee would be. He hadn't seen her come in at any point, but since he'd been doing his best to appear completely invisible, it was possible he'd missed her. It was likely she was up in her usual spot, though. Renee gave off "good student," probably never missing a single lecture, always dutifully taking notes, and likely getting A's without ever having to study.

Of course, the high wall that separated the first row of seats from the main lecture area (along with the space allotted for wheelchairs) meant Kai couldn't see much of the auditorium, let alone the back row. It was for the better. Dr. Miller had suggested Kai spend some time focusing on himself and not worry about the added strain of relationships, not that Renee would want anything to do with him anyway. Even if he explained himself, who would want to deal with that? Becca hadn't, and even Nikki . . .

He was getting off-track, and his pages were blank except for a few quickly scrawled words. His left hand curled around the pages, wrinkling them. Fuck, his leg *hurt*. And Micovic had been more than clear it was possible Kai would never even stand on it again.

Be someone else. Kai added. Then he hurriedly scratched it out, ripping the paper. Fuck. He hated this class. The first assignment had been to write about something they'd done last year. He'd lied, deciding he hadn't wanted to write about rehab. The teacher had seen through it and told him, *Write what you know* in her red cursive writing, but had praised his talent for fiction, recommending he consider a creative writing class for the following semester. It meant he either had to work on his lying, or he'd have to tell the truth this time.

The truth sucked. In the truth, pain was reality, family was a neurotic, workaholic brother, and love was an illusion.

Renee's heart began its rapid dance against her chest. She'd arrived late for her first two classes, sneaking in the back, grateful the professor didn't spot her and look up to give her an angry glare, so she'd been sure to make it a few minutes early to philosophy. She'd just started unpacking her things when she'd seen him. It was a significant distance from the far back row of the auditorium to the front, but the way her heart lurched, there was no doubt. Kai. Pushing his way into the room in a wheelchair, one leg in a bulky black brace. She blinked, thinking she must be hallucinating; she'd hoped so much to finally see him that she'd transposed his face onto someone else.

But no, it was him. Shocking golden hair falling into his face, long muscular arms she could see from here since he seemed to be wearing a fitted gray tee instead of his usual loose collared shirt. He looked pale and tired, even from this distance, his eyes downcast, pushing carefully toward the wall that fronted the tiered seating.

She rose, excited, planning to rush down the steps, but class was filling up quickly, and she'd barely made it down a few rows before she saw the solemn face of their professor, Dr. Becker, striding in. Disappointed, but not wanting to get on his notorious bad side, Renee returned to her seat. She'd catch Kai after class. The wheelchair and brace made her curious—maybe that's why he'd stood her up, gone MIA?—but it didn't matter. Her entire body buzzed with anticipation of seeing him, talking to him again. Just an hour. Concentrating would be rough.

"So what can we take away from the allegory of the cave?" Dr. Becker announced to the class. They'd been reading Plato's *Republic*. He paused. The class was silent except for the shift of bodies, the occasional cough. "No one? This is one of Plato's most famous works. Come on. Wake up."

Kai struggled to focus. His pain had been increasing steadily all morning, and now the dizziness and nausea were starting to battle for his attention, too. It was hard to keep his eyes open, the room seeming to tilt first one way, then the other. The voice of a student—apparently Dr. Becker had found a victim—leaked out of the murk of Kai's increasingly hazy brain.

“It has to do with the issues of reality and perception? That we are limited in how we interpret the world based on how we perceive it.”

Kai covered his mouth as he felt his stomach churn angrily, the room spinning even when he closed his eyes and focused on the semidarkness of his lids.

“Yes, that’s definitely part of it. Our understanding of the world is shaped by our experiences. It’s also a commentary on how man fears the unknown, the unfamiliar, the unfathomable.”

Oh God, if he threw up or passed out in the front of the class, in the middle of Becker’s lecture, he’d never forgive himself. He tried to take a few slow, deep breaths, hoping. . . . His thoughts were blurred, and he lowered his head to his legs, not caring if the professor saw and was pissed, thinking he was sleeping in class. He just needed everything to stop moving, to keep his breakfast from reasserting itself.

“When our prisoner is released, sees the ‘real’ world, but is then returned to the cave, how do the other prisoners see him?” Dr. Becker continued. “He’s a freak, a madman, because he no longer can see the world—their world, what they consider to be real—as valid any longer. He’s an outsider, someone who doesn’t quite belong in either world.”

The queasiness surged, and Kai gagged, barely able to keep himself under control. He had to get out of here—fast. Relieved he hadn’t bothered to take out his notebook and that he was near the door, he pushed toward the exit, managing to escape relatively unnoticed.

Though the restroom wasn’t far from the auditorium, Kai had to stop halfway there, forcing himself to breathe slow and deep, will himself not to throw up, not to pass out. Grateful that most guys were in class, Kai finally made his way to the restroom, shutting himself in the handicapped stall. He lowered his head toward his knees, willing the dizziness and nausea to go away. It felt like he were spinning on some kind of devious amusement ride, and even taking slow, measured breaths wasn’t helping.

His stomach clenched suddenly, overwhelmingly, and he barely got his mouth over the toilet in time. Hurling only made the dizziness worse, and it didn’t make him feel much better, either, his stomach still roiling in complaint. He fished out his cell phone, bracing his head with one hand, elbow on his knees.

It rang several times, nearly going to voicemail, when his brother answered, his voice rough, like he’d rushed to grab the phone. “Kai? You OK?”

A harsh noise escaped Kai’s mouth as he managed to hold the phone out of the way as he threw up again, coughing. He could vaguely hear Jon’s voice, panicked, on the phone. The room was swaying.

“Gonna pass out,” Kai managed to say.

“Kai, I’m coming to get you. Is there a vending machine nearby?”

Kai groaned, grabbed some toilet paper to wipe his mouth. “I think . . . I think there are some near the front entrance.”

“Do you think you can get to them?”

“Ugh. Why?”

“If you can, drink something with caffeine. It’ll give your blood pressure a quick boost.”

“Jon, I don’t think—” Kai’s vision wavered and he slumped, barely keeping himself from tumbling onto the floor.

Jon’s voice raised on octave. “Kai. Where are you? I’m calling 911.”

“No. No,” Kai tried to protest, but making words was hard. “Third floor. Thomas Hall. Gonna try to go downstairs.”

Vicky rushed through the automatic doors into the lobby of Thomas Hall. She paused just long enough to look around. Off to one side were the elevators, and across from it was a small lounge area, mostly empty; students were either in class or at lunch, so it didn’t take her long to spot the lanky blond man in the blue wheelchair, folded over, his face buried in his legs.

“Kai?” She rushed up to him, sinking down to her knees, lifting his chin gently. His skin was completely pale, his eyes dim when she looked into them, and his breathing was quick and shallow, but he was conscious. She felt for his pulse with one hand. “Kai, can you talk to me?”

“Vic?” He blinked a few times, as if confused. “Jon?”

“He had an emergency, so he sent me.” Kai’s pulse was weak, so she wrapped the blood pressure cuff she’d brought with her quickly around one arm. “You’ll be OK.” This cuff was automatic, so she was able to get a reading fast. 81/64. Much lower than that, and Kai wouldn’t be conscious. A few points beyond that, and he could have seizures, organ damage. Kai’s blinks were growing more lazy. Maybe it had been a mistake not to call the ambulance after all. She’d have to hightail it to the ER.

“Kai, I’m going to bring you to the hospital, so they can get your pressure up, OK?” She hurriedly packed away her supplies and thrust a bottle of Gatorade into his hands. “Can you try to drink that for me?”

Kai stared at the bottle for a moment, his eyes slightly unfocused. That wasn’t good.

“Kai. Come on. Drink some. You’ll feel better.”

He nodded drunkenly, struggled to open the lid, finally taking a few gulps. He barely swallowed before he was gagging, as if ready to throw it back up again.

Vicky frowned, but decided not to waste anymore time. She tossed her bag over her shoulder and pushed Kai out the door to her car. Hopefully he could drink and keep down some of the sports drink; it wasn’t as good as an IV, of course, but it’d help until she could get him to the ER.

Vicky saw Jon as soon as he stumbled into the ER waiting room, looking even more haggard than normal. His eyes scanned the crowd with urgency until they found Vicky, and he rushed up to her before she could hardly stand. He grabbed her wrists, staring into her eyes. He didn’t have to speak; his face said it all.

“They’re keeping him down here, hoping his pressure will stabilize. If it does, he can go home. If not, they’ll admit him.”

Jon nodded and pulled his hand through his hair. His face changed to pained worry that Vicky wanted to kiss off his face. They’d only technically been seeing each other a few weeks, but it felt like longer. After all, Vicky had known Jon for years, and they’d gotten to be pretty close friends last year while Kai was awaiting his transplant. Jon wasn’t the most outwardly open or affectionate person, but behind closed doors—in her office or his—he’d always accepted more physical touch than he normally did otherwise. Still, they’d both agreed to keep things discreet between them while at work. The hospital didn’t forbid employee fraternization (as long as it wasn’t mentor/student or boss/underling), but they’d both agreed it’d be better to keep things private for now.

So she had to settle for squeezing his wrists and offering him a faint smile of encouragement. “He didn’t lose consciousness, at least not when I was with him. I think they were bringing in Gates and a nephro consult, if you want to go see him. I should probably get back upstairs.”

Jon’s eyes lingered on hers for a long moment, as if to say, *Thank you* and maybe even, *Don’t leave*, but it was impossible to be sure. His hand slid into hers, and he squeezed her fingertips.

“Call me, if you need anything,” she said. Reluctantly, she dropped his hand and walked out of the waiting room.

Jon found his brother in one of the back ER exam rooms, one of the few that was an actual room with four walls and a door, unlike most of the curtained sections where patients were treated. Perhaps Vicky had pulled some strings for him. Kai lay on his back, his legs elevated, a couple IVs snaking out from under the blanket. After the week in the hospital, Kai’s arms and hands

were bruised, so they must have started the line in the femoral vein in his leg. An easier place to start a line anyway with Kai's pressure as low as it was. Jon also noticed the tubing peeking out of the sheets leading to a bed bag; obviously, they were tracking Kai's urine output as a rough gauge of kidney function. Even if Kai's nephrologist had cleared him last week, Kai's pressure issues still were unresolved. A blood pressure cuff was wrapped around one arm, linked to the monitor to check his pressure regularly. Kai's eyes were closed, but Jon could tell by the pattern of his breathing and the subtle workings of his jaw that he wasn't asleep. Likely in pain.

Since that one moment of weakness his first day awake in the hospital, Kai hadn't admitted to Jon how much his injured quads hurt him, but he didn't need to say anything for Jon to know.

Jon lightly touched Kai's forearm, and Kai's eyes opened, the bright blue dim. "I can't leave you alone three hours," Jon said, trying to joke.

"Anything to get out of philosophy," Kai said in a dry voice, but he smiled faintly.

"Gates and the nephrologist are leaning toward neurally mediated hypotension. Possibly connected to your MLS, or maybe a side effect of some of your medications."

Kai's eyes slid shut, and he offered the subtlest of nods. "He's taken me off the Valium. And put me back on the Mexitil."

Jon hissed, then took Kai's hand and squeezed it. "How's your pain?"

Kai snorted. "Doesn't matter. Can't have anything stronger anyway."

Jon sighed loudly.

Kai peeked one eye open. "I'll live, Jon."

Jon grunted.

Kai took a deep breath, which hitched, pain written in the momentary crease of his forehead. "I decided I'm going to drop a couple classes."

Jon sputtered. "Kai—"

"Philosophy and Psych, probably." Kai opened his eyes again. "Look at me, Jon. Do you know how many classes there've been so far? About fifteen. Know how many I've actually gone to?" Kai held up the hand unencumbered by the cuff, fingers spread. "Less than this."

Jon shrugged. "It's college, Kai. Lots of people skip class."

Kai sighed, then his face scrunched up and his free hand went to his bad thigh, smoothing lightly over it. The softest moan escaped his lips. "Maybe I'm wasting my time in school."

"What? Kai—"

"Why spend four—or even five, at the rate I'm going—years of my life? For what? That might be all I have. Four more years."

"Jesus, Kai."

"What, Jon? It's true. Less than a third of people who have a double-lung transplant survive five years, and survival drops exponentially every year after that. You know that." Kai closed his eyes, then opened them, staring up at the ceiling. "Sometimes . . . I think accepting the transplant was a mistake."

"What?!"

Kai turned his head slowly to meet his brother's eyes. "Maybe it would have been better if I'd just died last year, Jon."

"Kai, you're in pain and not thinking clearly from low blood pressure. You don't know what you're saying."

"Do I?" Kai took in a deep breath. "I feel like those kids in that movie. The one that came out earlier this year? Where they avoid dying in the plane crash only to have death stalk them one by one. Like I'm on borrowed time. Like I cheated death."

"For fuck's sake, Kai," Jon hissed, pulled his phone off the clip on his belt. "I'm calling Dr. Miller."

“And what is she going to tell me? What can she possibly say? What can anyone possibly say? . . . Forget it.” Kai groaned, covered his mouth, glanced sideways, trying to see the monitor. “What’s my pressure?”

Reluctantly, Jon reattached his phone to his belt and consulted the screen. “95/59.” He frowned, found the chart on the end of Kai’s bed and glanced through it. “It should be higher than that by now. And your diastolic’s gotten worse.” Kai didn’t respond, and Jon saw his brother’s eyes were closed, frowning. He looked sick. “Kai?”

“Couldn’t take Phenergan, either,” Kai said in explanation, and Jon could hear Kai swallow, as if he were trying not to throw up.

Jon’s voice turned crisp. “They didn’t give you *anything* for nausea?” No wonder Kai was talking crazy. He was in pain, his brain was a little low on oxygen, and he was probably nauseous and dizzy from the Mexitl on top of everything.

“Jon.” Kai paused a long while. “If I pass out,” he said slowly, “don’t let them admit me. Please.”

Jon smoothed Kai’s forehead. “Kai.”

“I want to go home.”

Jon sighed. “I know. How about a deal? If your diastolic gets up to 65 and stays there within the next two hours, I’ll take you home. If not, you stay the night until they get you stable again.”

Kai lifted his free hand to his chest. “*Fine.*”

“And I’ll get you something for the nausea that won’t affect your blood pressure.”

A few hours later, Vicky ran into Jon when she stepped off the elevator. “Jon?”

He had his hand in his hair, and that faraway look in his eyes he always got when his brain was working through a tough problem, like puzzling out a particularly tricky diagnosis or treatment plan. Normally, she found it sexy as hell, but now it just made her chest ache for him.

It took her a few tries to snap him out of his reverie, and she suspected he’d been standing there several minutes, multiple cars coming and going without his even noticing.

“They’re overnighting him. Transferring him to the medicine unit now.”

Vicky pulled Jon into the elevator and hit the button for the sixth floor—pulmonology, where Jon’s office was. “When was the last time you checked your sugar? Ate?”

Jon leaned against the back wall of the car, his face twitching when he noticed the floor she’d chosen—medicine was on eight—but said nothing.

Alone in the elevator, Vicky eased closer, wrapping her arm around his. “It’ll take them time to transfer him. In the meanwhile, you’ll eat, take your shot, and we’ll talk about something that has nothing to do with Kai or medicine. OK?”

Jon sighed, then pulled her closer. They were alone in the elevator, but at any moment, the car could stop, exposing them to colleagues, patients, visitors—anyone—so Jon’s motion took her by surprise. He held her close to his chest, then kissed the top of her head.

She managed to pull away from him enough to meet his eyes, but before she could say anything he kissed her. Slow, deep, but surprisingly sweet. They clung to each other for a moment, and in that instant, they could both forget they were in an elevator, that Kai was sick, that maybe *they* were a bad idea, and just sink into the sensations of tongue against tongue, lips against lips. Vicky’s heart continued to beat out a staccato rhythm against her chest as Jon pulled away just before the bell dinged and the car slowed to signal their arrival. How could they have made it up six floors without the car stopping once? Vicky could feel her cheeks were flushed, and Jon’s gray eyes had brightened somehow, if only fleetingly. His face betrayed just the hint of a smile as he stepped away from her.

“Thank you,” he whispered just as the doors finally opened and they were no longer alone.

Nikki hadn't bothered to go home after her shift. She figured she'd meet Jon, leave the pie with him, then go back to her apartment and shower before heading to the Grayhound station. But when she got to Kai's room, she realized Jon was nowhere in sight.

It was a regular double-room, not the cube of ICU or the single from the step-down unit where she'd last visited him. A curtain divided him from his roommate, and the lights were dimmed, but from the doorway she could still see him. He lay flat on his back, his legs up, staring at the ceiling. The room was much quieter than his previous ones, the monitor silent, the only sound the subtle snore of the other person behind the curtain.

For a moment, she debated leaving. Kai had made it clear he didn't want to see her. But even from here, she could see that vacant look in his eyes, the way his jaw worked as he ground his teeth. And she *had* brought him pie.

She knocked lightly on the door before striding in slowly. He turned his head toward her, and his face didn't betray anger. Instead, his eyes were lit with surprise, a happy, relieved kind of shock. Like the look on a man's face who's been trapped in a collapsed mine so long he's given up hope, and suddenly, he spots the beam of his rescuer's flashlight. It made Nikki's heart clench in her chest.

Nikki smiled. "We've got to stop meeting like this."

He choked out a laugh, not able to hide the cringe that followed.

She hid her frown and held up the white styrofoam box. "I brought you pie."

"Ugh. Everyone's always trying to make me eat."

She smirked, flipped open the box. "I spoke to your brother. He said you're supposed to stock up on salt, but we both know you're also more stubborn than a biker in a barfight, so I brought you apple with cheese."

Kai raised the bed slightly, then patted the edge. Nikki sat on it, legs dangling off, and offered him a bite of pie on a plastic fork. His eyebrow raised, and he took the fork from her. "Don't feed me."

The last time Nikki had seen Kai, he'd been eating through a feeding tube, and he was so drugged up on muscle relaxants he could barely lift his arm. So she could understand why he'd snapped at her. She decided to say nothing, watching as he brought the fork to his lips, hesitating before he took a bite.

"Still nauseous?"

Kai looked up, off to the side, and Nikki followed his gaze to the bank of IVs. "Finally got on a new drug. It works pretty well. Doesn't make me drowsy, either. Gives one hell of a headache, but I'll take the headache." He hesitantly put the bite in his mouth, chewing slowly, eventually humming happily. "I'm starving," he said, seemingly surprised.

Nikki laughed. "I brought almost the whole pie. Figured if you didn't want it all, your brother might like some."

Kai laughed around another mouthful. "Jon's diabetic."

"No way."

Kai nodded. "He doesn't like sweets, anyway."

Nikki smiled. "How's the pie?" Kai had already eaten about half of it.

"So much better than the salty broth they made me eat earlier. Before the antiemetic kicked in, too." He finished another bite, then set down his fork and looked at Nikki. "I'm sorry," he said. "For last week. I was in a bad place, and I took it out on you."

Nikki shrugged.

"And thank you for the pie. I haven't had any in weeks."

A smile slipped onto Nikki's face, and she found herself tucking a strand of hair behind Kai's ear. "I know." She felt that subtle burn, hinting at the beginning of tears, and she had to put all her effort in keeping her smile in place.

Kai frowned, closed his eyes a moment. He suddenly started to lean toward one side, throwing out his hand to brace himself. He caught her arm, gripping tight enough it sent her heart pumping in the beginnings of panic.

“What’s wrong?”

“Dizzy.” He lowered the bed, never opening his eyes. She saw his breathing grow faster, and he looked much paler than before.

“Kai?”

The monitor beeped a warning.

“Just need a minute.”

Nikki packed up the rest of the pie and set it aside. Just in time for a nurse to come in.

“Mr. Fox?”

Nikki backed away, toward the door, letting the nurse do her thing. She should leave. She hadn’t even changed, still in her uniform, complete with a stain from that morning where a little kid had knocked over his mom’s mug, spilling coffee across the table and onto Nikki’s skirt.

A moment later, the nurse left, giving Nikki a sour frown. Kai looked a little better than he had a few minutes before, but she was forced to remember he wasn’t here for a vacation. She took a seat on the edge of the bed again, and he slipped his hand into hers, which she laid in her lap.

“Know what I love most about you?” Kai asked suddenly, after a long moment of quiet between them.

Nikki’s heart fluttered a little—actually fluttered. She’d never believe it if she weren’t feeling it herself. She knew he didn’t mean *love* love, but hearing him say it still hit her. Even harder since she’d be leaving soon. She managed to shake her head.

Kai smoothed his thumb over the top of her hand. “You never ask me, ‘how are you feeling?’”

Nikki tilted her head, raking her mind, trying to recall the past month in particular and whether or not that was true. It seemed an odd thing for him to say. Wouldn’t that be something *not* to like about someone?

Sensing her confusion, he squeezed her hand. “I’ve probably heard ‘how are you feeling’ a million times in my life. Most of the time? People want me to tell them I’m fine—kind of like when someone says, ‘How are you?.’ They don’t expect a real answer. They don’t *want* a real answer. The rest of the time, it’s people who mean well, who’ll push me for details I don’t want to give, or make me talk about things I’m tired of talking about.”

“So how are you feeling?”

Kai mirrored her smile. “Fuck you.”

“I’d like that very much,” she said, walking her fingers up his belly and chest. Then she lied, because she couldn’t stand to tell him. Not now. “In fact, you need to come over once you’re better.”

“*Come over?*”

Nikki rolled her eyes and playfully hit Kai in the chest. “You did not just make the worst pun ever.”

Laughter and muted voices filtered out of Kai’s room as Vicky and Jon approached. Jon was ready to interrupt, but Vicky pulled him back, holding up a finger to her lips. Kai seemed happy with this girl, if the snippets of their flirtatious banter and laughter were any indication. Vicky had known Kai a long time, since before Jon even started his fellowship. He was good at smiling and pretending he was fine—much better than Jon, who wore his worries on his sleeve—but it was nice to see some genuine mirth for once.

“His girlfriend?” she whispered.

Jon shrugged. “I’m pretty sure it’s complicated.”

“I know you’re there,” Kai called out suddenly.

Nikki and Vicky both laughed, and Jon sighed, rolling his eyes. They entered the room together, Jon immediately offering an apology. "It was Vicky's idea."

Kai studied the two of them for a moment, then signed quickly to Jon, smiling. She couldn't quite follow, but he pointed at Jon, made a sign in the air, then drew a finger from his mouth down to his chest that could maybe have meant something like "speak" or "tell." Jon hadn't told Kai, but it hadn't taken him more than a few seconds to figure it out.

Jon blushed, and Kai laughed.

Kai made another sign, hand flat, palm up, drawing it from his chin downward, gesturing outwardly toward his brother, just slightly. He grinned when he did it, and Jon blushed deeper. Vicky and Nikki both looked to the brothers for some sort of insight. Jon shifted his weight uncomfortably.

"I should probably go," Nikki said once the silence began to be awkward.

"No," Vicky said immediately. "No." She cleared her throat. "Actually, Jon and I have a party to go to." She sensed everyone's eyes on her, but kept talking. "You should stay."

Jon tried to talk, but Vicky put a hand on his arm, looking at Kai, who was trying to hide his smile.

Kai passed one hand along the side of his head, almost like a weak salute, then tapped the thumb of the same hand on his chest, fingers spread, twisting outward slightly. "I'll be fine. Nikki'll stay with me, and you can come back in a few hours. After the party."

Jon scrunched his eyebrows, crossed his index fingers and drew them apart with intensity. He moved his right hand around his other, almost like he was pushing water away, until it landed, palm up, on top of his left palm with a mild slapping of skin. Then he lifted his right hand, palm out toward Kai, before sliding his fingers on his right fist through several quick movements—letters, maybe? His brows knit as he finally ended with a quick index finger at his temple. It was clearly a question, and Jon was clearly concerned, which was understandable, but more than that, Vicky couldn't say.

Kai sighed. His signing wasn't as slow as Jon's, and she had trouble even distinguishing all of his individual motions, but he had the look of a teenager telling his father, *Don't worry so much. I'll be fine*. She caught the end, where he raised his eyebrows slightly, drawing his index finger from his mouth up and out in an arch. His mouth moved, and she could just make out the word: "Really."

Vicky squeezed Jon's arm. "Jon, he's not alone, and he's safe here. It's a hospital. And we'll only be gone a few hours."

"That's what I said," Kai chimed in.

Jon nodded, reluctant, but finally sighed, relenting. "I'll keep my phone on."

Kai grinned, tapped two fingers on his nose, then rotated his hand around and tapped them on his left hand's two fingers.

"What does that mean?" Vicky asked as she led Jon out of the room.

"He told me to have fun."

"Then I consider it my duty to make sure you follow his advice." Vicky winked and kissed Jon on the cheek, unable to resist the "special" feeling that filled her knowing that Jon had chosen her for once over his brother.

Vicky answered her door in her bathrobe, half dressed. Jon was early. Big surprise. "You said you had a costume," she said, but before he could answer, she took in his outfit. Scrubs, which Jon rarely wore. His hair was styled in a retro kind of way—Jon's "styling" of his hair usually amounted to the disaster it was left in after he'd spent a day pulling his fingers through it. And the white coat . . . it didn't fit right, the sleeves a little too short, the shoulders a little tight. Then she noticed the embroidered name: *D. Howser, MD* instead of the expected *J. Taylor, MD*.

"Oh my God."

Jon laughed and stepped inside, closing the door behind him.

“Oh my God. Turn around.”

He did, reluctantly. “Wow, you even kind of have the same hair. You’re cuter, though,” she said, kissing him lightly on the lips. “Let me just throw on my dress and we can go.”

Jon grabbed the lapel of her robe and pulled her closer, kissing her again, deeper this time. “We don’t need to go anywhere,” he said, his chest heaving, his breath hot against her ear.

It was so tempting. “Kate will kill me if I don’t show up.”

He clung to her a little longer, but then released her. “Don’t make me wait too long.”

Jon had headed off to get them each a drink almost as soon as they arrived, and it wasn’t long before Kate found Vicky. “Sexy nurse. Really?”

Vicky shrugged. “It’s a classic. What can I say.”

Kate linked her arm in Vicky’s and led her off to the side, then leaned in. “Was that really Jon Taylor I saw you come in with? *The* Jon Taylor? At a social event?”

Vicky found herself smiling, nodding.

“He’s not in costume, but I guess we can only hope for so much,” Kate added.

“Actually, he’s Doogie Howser.”

Kate gasped, covering her mouth for a moment, forcing herself not to scream. “I thought he *hated* that nickname!”

Vicky shrugged.

“Wonders never cease.” Kate shook her head. “So . . . does this mean the rumors are true? About the two of you?”

Vicky felt her cheeks heat, offering a slight nod.

“Wow. Wow.” Kate looked around, to make sure they weren’t being overheard, smiling and waving at a few of the guests. “I mean, I heard the gossip, of course, but I couldn’t believe it. Especially since my *best friend* didn’t say anything to me about it!”

Vicky opened her mouth to explain herself, but Jon arrived with their drinks, offering one to Vicky with a sweet, besotted smile that—complete with his Doogie Howser look—was knee-weakeningly adorable. “Kate, this is Jon. Maybe you two know each other?”

Jon shook Kate’s hand. “Peds, right?”

Kate nodded. “Vic and I are old friends from nursing school, even if she did abandon us, despite her costume,” Kate said with a smirk, wrapping her arm around Vic and squeezing.

Vicky noticed Jon seemed unsure how to proceed, drinking his punch as if he were parched. “Uh, I didn’t know you two knew each other. Uh, I mean, I knew you knew each other, because Vicky told me this was her friend’s party. I meant, I mean, I didn’t realize you were *you*. Uh.” Jon reached up to pull his fingers through his hair, then seemed to realize he’d mess up his costume, and awkwardly dropped his hand, downed the rest of his drink. “Um. Nice to meet—I mean, happy birthday.”

Kate laughed. “Thank you. I’m glad you came. I have to go mingle. You two have fun.” Kate departed, but not before giving Vicky a comically exaggerated wink.

Jon stood awkwardly after Kate left them, obviously unsure what to do next. It occurred to Vicky she’d only ever seen Jon at work in some form or another, or at home, worried about Kai.

“You really are out of your element,” she muttered.

“What?”

Vicky took Jon’s empty cup, tucked hers into it, and set it aside, then led him toward the living room, which Kate had turned into a makeshift dance floor.

“Uh, Vicky . . . I don’t know how to dance.”

Vicky wrapped her arms around Jon’s waist. “This isn’t the tango. Relax. Just move with me.”

After a few minutes, Jon’s nervousness lessened and he gripped her tighter against him. Vicky relished the way her body felt so right against his, cherishing his smell, simple and

masculine with just a hint of the hospital lingering, as if it always clung to him—disinfectant, alcohol from antibacterial gel, latex.

The thought of latex made her blush. They'd barely done more than kiss, but she knew Jon wanted more than that with her. It'd been so long for both of them, and normally, Vicky liked to take things slow. But she and Jon had already known each other so long. If it happened tonight, would that be so bad?

"So . . . I noticed you haven't mentioned Kai once yet during this entire conversation," Evangeline said over the line.

Renee lay in her bed, phone to her ear. She'd been talking to her grandmother for the better part of an hour, hearing tales about which cousin was boycotting whose wedding, how Luc was doing at NOCCA—fantastic—and how Marie—Renee's mother—still tried to convince JP to move back in every time she saw him. In other words, not much had changed on the homefront.

"I'm starting to think I imagined him."

Evangeline let out a short laugh. "Like *Sleeping Beauty*?" She hummed some of the theme from Disney's version, one of Renee's favorite films when she was a kid.

Renee sighed. "He was there for like two seconds today, in class, but he disappeared again before I could talk to him." Renee pulled her blankets around her, as if everything with Kai—including that one wonderful kiss she really needed to forget about—really was a dream, and if she could just close her eyes she'd relive it. "I think he might have hurt his leg or something. He had a brace on his knee and was in a wheelchair. Maybe that's why he's been harder to track down than—"

"Your Great Aunt Celeste's etouffee recipe?"

That made Renee smile. She felt a physical pain in her chest, realizing how much she missed her grandmother. Maybe it really had been a mistake going so far from home. She didn't have to tell her parents about Jude, and even in as small a town as New Orleans, she could avoid him if she wanted to. She felt tears forming and squeezed her eyes together to try to stop them.

"Sweetie, let me tell you something. The moment I met your paw paw I knew it. Call it love at first sight, call it a silly, sheltered Uptown girl getting treated sweet by a handsome young man. But I knew."

"Really?" Renee sniffled, reached for the box of tissues on her nightstand to blow her nose.

"For true," Evangeline said, her voice a little softer; she must have heard Renee's sniffing. "But it took me a while to convince him."

Renee laughed, her tears easing. "Knowing Paw Paw, I don't find that hard to believe."

Renee heard her grandmother sigh softly. "He'll kill me for telling you this, but the truth is, he fell for me just as hard, just as fast. It just took him longer to realize I didn't want to get married the next day."

"So what are you saying?"

"It's all right to keep the candle burning, but he might need time. Don't sit up in the window waiting for him every night."

"Is that old-person for 'I should see other people'?"

Evangeline laughed. "I'm telling you, from everything you've told me, you two remind me so much of your paw paw and I when we were your age. Sometimes men need time to get their heads wrapped around something scary like love."

Love? Evangeline had mentioned the word before, but Renee knew what she felt for Kai couldn't be that, and certainly, there was no way he could feel the same. But still . . . it made her feel better. She might fail as a stalker, but she didn't have to give up hope. Her grandparents—whose 50th anniversary was the coming summer—had the kind of marriage she'd always imagined she'd have one day—well, except maybe for the traditional gender roles. Certainly, no man on earth would marry Renee for her culinary skills.

“You all right, sweetie?”

“Yeah. I am now. Thanks, Maw Maw.”

“You stay warm up there, and once you finally snare your man, you bring him down here and we’ll show him what real food’s like.”

Renee smiled. “Love ya, Maw Maw.”

“Love ya, too. And remember, I can always send your Paw Paw up there to knock some sense into that kid if necessary.”

A few hours later, Vicky returned from the bathroom to the sounds of “The Macarena” blaring at full blast. How had every possible copy of that song not been tracked down and destroyed years ago? A crowd had gathered around the dance floor, and several of the people were laughing so hard they could barely breathe.

Vicky pushed her way through the bodies, searching for Jon. They should probably go, so he’d have time to shower, change, etc., before heading back to his brother. Her heart fell through her body into the floor when she finally found him.

In the center of the dance floor, dancing to the song with chaotic, wild, exaggerated abandon.

Oh God.

“Don’t you worry ‘bout my boyfriend, the one who named me Macarena . . .” Jon slurred along with the music.

“Jon?” Vicky said, approaching.

He whirled around, grinning like a Cheshire Cat. *A drunk. Very. Drunk.* Cheshire cat. “Vicky! Dance with me!”

She let him pull her close and gripped his hip with one hand as he drunkenly swayed to the beat. “Jon. How much have you had to drink?”

“Uh . . .” He held up two fingers, almost poking her in the eye.

“Really?”

“Really!” Jon twirled her awkwardly. “Kai didn’t tell you? Oh. I can’t drink.” Jon giggled. “Does funny things to my blood sugar. Makes me *loopy!*” He laughed again. When he continued, he spoke with strange pauses, as if he were having trouble forming a complete thought, let alone a sentence. “One. One? One drink and I’m tipsy. Two. And I’m silly. Three . . . and I’m on the floor.”

Vicky sighed, shook her head. “Come on, let’s get you home, then.”

“Oh, dance with me!”

Vicky laughed, found Kate in the crowd and waved to her. “Party’s over.”

The entire drive home, as short as it was, Jon kept trying to kiss her and grope her, and while a part of her found it hot, she had to keep pushing him off, reminding him that she was driving. When she finally got him inside his apartment and checked his blood sugar, it was sky high. So she injected him, then led him to his bedroom, figuring she’d undress him, put him to bed, and take another reading to make sure he was OK.

He was less drunk now, especially as the insulin started clearing the excess sugar from his blood, but he still stumbled, falling back on his bed with a bounce and getting tangled in the white coat as she tried to help him out of it. Finally, she managed to pull it off, the momentum sending her toppling onto him on the bed.

He laughed. Then he kissed her. Not on the lips, but on her jaw, then her neck, then her shoulder. Soft, tender kisses that left a fire in their wake. His hands moved around to the back of her dress, fumbling for the zipper, continuing to suck and kiss at any exposed skin his mouth could find.

She felt herself getting lightheaded, the subtle want of earlier blossoming into reality. She pushed away from him, yanking off her dress and tossing it aside. She could see, through the

thin fabric of his scrub bottoms, he was hard. He tore off his shirt, worked to undo his pants while she did the same for her bra and panties.

Vicky had never seen Jon completely naked before; he was extremely thin, though he had a bit of a belly from years of insulin injections there, and a long, old scar along one hip. A line of dark golden, almost brown hair traced its way from between his pecs toward his navel, with darker, curlier hair at his groin.

“Leave the stockings on,” Jon grinned, beckoning her closer.

Laughing, Vicky obeyed, approaching, but before she could crawl back onto the bed, he wrapped an arm around her, pulling her toward him and trailing more kisses, a line from her hip to breast. The gesture was strangely erotic, and she found herself gripping his shoulder to help keep herself upright.

It was this tender side of Jon she loved; she could see the hunger in his eyes, yet he took his time to explore her, treasure her, his fingers dancing lightly along her skin, bringing up goosebumps and sending a frisson up her spine that made her shiver.

When he finally took a nipple in his mouth, one hand cupping between her thighs, she gasped. He sucked and rubbed, teasing her until she was ready to scream before slipping first one, then two fingers inside her, probing to find the spot that would make her grunt.

He pushed her until she was about ready to cry out, then pulled back, guiding her onto the bed, climbing on top of her and kissing her—this time on the mouth—with passionate intensity, rocking his hips so he ground against her leg, but seemingly giving her a chance to change her mind—as if she could think straight after what he’d done to her?

He pulled away from the kiss, staring down into her eyes as if for permission. His seemed suddenly very blue; it had to be a trick of the light.

“We shouldn’t,” she said, her voice weak even to her own ears as it struggled through her panting breath.

“Why?” He blew hot breath on her neck before licking and kissing and nipping the skin there, just at the nape.

“You’re drunk. This would be a mistake.”

“Not so drunk anymore,” he said between kisses. “And it’s not a mistake.”

She could see in his eyes he was sincere, and the way he was nudging her with little punctuated rolls of his hips made her want to throw all logic to the wind and pull him into her. “We should be safe,” she hedged.

“I haven’t been with anyone in two years,” Jon whispered, “and the hospital does full blood tests constantly.”

“I’ve wanted you a long time,” Vicky said, spreading her legs and sliding her hand down along his back.

Jon smiled, shifted, and pushed in, grunting. He dipped his head, resting it on her shoulder as he moved, slow, agonizingly slow, and Vicky realized she was ready to cry it felt so fantastic. Had it always felt this good? Had it been so long she’d forgotten? Or was it something about Jon?

She wrapped her legs around his hips, linking her ankles and pulling him toward her, urging him to go harder, faster.

“God, Vic,” Jon panted, thrusting hard, stealing nipping kisses when he could, “I’m not going to last much longer.”

“Me either,” she said, dragging her fingers along his back, desperate to bring him closer. He shifted, rolled his hips, and sank deeper; they both cried out at the sudden sensation, each of them moving frantically, reaching for their own climax.

It hit her first, then him, seconds later, perhaps the spasms inside her pushing him over the edge. She felt his heat, and a couple quick thrusts, then he stilled, breathing heavily, their skin clinging to each other from rapidly cooling sweat.

He rolled to the side, helping pull her stockings off and tossing them away before wrapping her in his arms, an embrace almost as good as the sex. "Thank you," he whispered against her.

"Thank you," she said with a laugh, inhaling his scent, stronger now, a mix of sweat and sex. "I'm glad you got drunk," she teased.

"Me too," he echoed.

She felt his grip relax and his breathing shift, signs he'd slipped into sleep. Her brain raced, struggling to process. It had all happened so fast, and yet . . . she could think later. Right now, she was well fucked, in the arms of a man she could possibly love, if he'd let her. Everything else could wait.

Kai woke up, groggy. The lights in his room were dim, but as he looked around, Nikki was nowhere in sight. She could have simply gone to the bathroom, or for a cup of coffee, but then his eyes fell on a sheet of paper, neatly folded so it'd stand on its own, sitting on top of the rolling bed table, near enough for him to reach without much effort. He could clearly read his name, in a large, curved print, complete with a circle for the dot on the "I."

He reached for it, feeling his heart rate spike, though not enough to trigger the alarm on the monitor. His eyes scanned over Nikki's hurried writing.

Kai,

I'd already had this letter ready, planning to leave it, and the pie, with your brother for him to give to you later. But then you welcomed me into your room, and we laughed and flirted and I couldn't leave you.

So when you fell asleep, I snuck out to the nurses' station, got a pen and paper, and sat down to write you a new letter. This letter.

There are things I don't know about you, and there are things you don't know about me. For a long time, that was fine. OK. It's one reason we worked. But these past few weeks, you and I both know things have changed between us.

I wanted to be right for you. Desperately. But just because we want something, doesn't make it so.

The night I hurt you and you kicked me out of your room, I found myself slipping back into the old me. Maybe even the real me. Not the Nikki you came to know as well as I'd let you over the past half year, but instead, a girl named Monica who'd come to Jonesville years ago looking for something more from herself.

I went to a bar. I picked up a stranger. I took him to a hotel.

I had sex with him.

For money.

And even though I thought of you, nothing could change what I'd done. Who I was.

What I am.

I love you.

I love you, and that's why I have to hurt you again.

Because I can never be the girl you need. The friend who will support you when you need a shoulder to lean on. The woman who you can be proud to call yours. A girl you can see yourself with years down the line. Who will see you and love you the way you deserve to be loved.

A girl you can love.

I don't know what happened between you and the girl you were going to leave me for, but find her, Kai. Please. Maybe she's the one you need, and you can forget about me as another spot on your road to your future.

Just promise me you won't hate yourself for this. Hate me, instead. I deserve it. For prying open your bud of a heart, for making you trust me, for betraying that trust. For not being there when you woke up this time. Remember, the phoenix always rises from the ashes.

-Nikki

September 23, 2000

Ring. Ring. Ring. Vicky's eyes opened to a dark, unfamiliar room. A warm body stretched out along her side, bare skin touching her bare skin. Her eyes adjusted to the light, recognizing Jon's sleeping form. He was sprawled on his stomach, one arm hanging off the edge of the bed, the other draped over a pillow, cradling it for his head. His hair stood up on all ends. The sheet draped over his back, leaving his pale skin mostly exposed. The alarm clock displayed the time in neon as 3:14. Yawning, Vicky stretched and snuggled down beside him, wrapping her arm around his waist. He murmured happily in his sleep and drew toward her.

I could get used to this, Vicky thought as she closed her eyes to slip back into sleep. She'd just started to drift off when the phone rang again. Jon slept through it, seemingly oblivious. He normally had so much trouble falling asleep, but once he did, he slept like the dead. She figured it was his body's adaptation to years of long shifts in the ER and ICU; you needed to sleep deep when you could.

Vicky finally realized his phone was in the middle of the floor, buried in the midst of the clothes they'd discarded the night before. She could hardly believe they'd had sex. Jon had been drunk, and though he'd insisted he wanted her, he was a man. If he'd been honest about how long it'd been, which Vicky was sure he was—Jon wasn't the best liar even when he wasn't drunk—it was possible he was just inebriated, horny, and had a willing woman. Maybe he'd wake up and realize last night was a mistake. *They* were a mistake.

And his fucking phone kept ringing. Jon wasn't on-call, so it might mean bad news about Kai. *Dammit*. Vicky finally found the phone. All the missed calls were from the same number, and though she didn't recognize it exactly, she knew it was one of the Jonesville Memorial numbers. She rose, heading back to bed, Jon's phone in her hand. It rang again, the same number, so she answered.

"Dr. Taylor's phone."

"I need to speak with him," a harried female voice said.

Vicky's stomach knotted nervously, but she forced herself to keep her voice level. "What is this regarding?"

"His brother. Kai Fox. Is Dr. Taylor available? I need to speak to him."

"What happened? Is Kai OK?"

"I'm afraid I need to speak to Dr. Taylor."

"Of course," Vicky said, hiding her frustration; the nurse was only doing her job, respecting patient privacy. "Let me wake him." Vicky's mind raced with possibilities. A series of frantic calls from the hospital regarding Kai, at three in the morning, couldn't be good news.

Kneeling on the bed, Vicky grabbed Jon's shoulder and shook him hard. "Jon. Wake up." He groaned, but otherwise continued to sleep. "Jon! Wake up!"

No matter how hard she shook him or how loud she shouted, he didn't wake. She pulled him onto his back, flipped on all the lights, and finally, he blinked his eyes open.

"Kai," Vicky said, thrusting the phone in his face.

Jon was immediately awake, shooting up in bed, phone pressed to his ear. "Dr. Taylor."

Vicky watched as Jon rose, listening intently to whatever the woman on the other end was saying, picking through their discarded clothes. He was hopping into his boxers when he suddenly shouted, "No. No! I will *not* authorize that." Jon bent and snatched the scrub pants from the floor. "And I don't care. I'm his medical proxy. I have power of attorney. You're not doing anything until I get there. Understood?"

Jon hung up violently, tying the scrub pants to keep them from falling.

"Is—is he OK?" Vicky asked hesitantly, taking his cue and pulling on her own clothes.

Jon huffed, pawing through drawers until he pulled out a faded T-shirt Vicky was pretty

sure belonged to Kai and slipped it on. "I should never have left him," Jon said, clipping his pager to his waist and shoving his wallet and phone in his back pocket. "Where are my keys?"

Vicky spied them on the floor and bent to pick them up, offering them to him, concerned. Jon's face was unreadable for any more info beyond guilt and worry. "Jon?"

Jon sighed. "He's OK, and he's not OK." Satisfied he had everything, he jogged out to the kitchen. Vicky followed, carrying half her costume over one arm. Jon was pacing, his glucose monitor in one hand, apparently waiting for the reading. He saw Vicky and looked up, apologetic. "I'm sorry. I have to go to him." Jon abandoned the monitor on the counter and started searching through the cabinets.

Vicky shook her head, crossed to the other end of the room and extracted two glycemic meal bars. Then she laid a hand on Jon's shoulder, offering them to him. He accepted with a reluctant smile.

"If we're together, this is how it'll be, won't it?"

Jon kept looking around, as if he felt he were forgetting something. Finally satisfied, he headed toward the door. She followed.

"I mean, you'll always choose him."

Jon paused, locking the door behind them, but said nothing.

"It's OK," Vicky said. "Just drop me off on your way to the hospital. Eat some real food later. And call me?"

Jon pulled her close, leaning in to whisper in her ear. "I regret last night only because Kai needed me. Not because of what we did. Thank you." He kissed her, chaste but intense, before jogging off to his car.

When Jon arrived on Kai's floor, a nurse was arguing with a young, ragged-looking guy who had all the markings of a resident. She happened to glance up and see Jon, a look of relief rushing through her.

"Dr. Taylor?" she asked hopefully.

Before Jon could finish nodding, the resident turned. "We can't sedate your brother because of his blood pressure, so we restrained him. But he should be moved to a psych—"

"No. I'm talking to him. Now. Then you and I are going to talk," Jon said, practically jabbing his finger in the other doctor's eye.

Jon signaled to the nurse to follow him down the hall. "What happened?" Jon asked as soon as they were out of the resident's earshot.

"He started acting irrationally. Throwing things. Screaming. Trying to pull out his IVs . . ."

"Did he hurt anyone? Himself?"

The nurse inhaled, then shook her head. "Not exactly. But we had to move him to a private room, because he was scaring the other patients."

Jon nodded. Kai's behavior worried him, but he wasn't going to let them put his brother on a psych hold until he'd had a chance to talk to him personally. Maybe the low blood pressure was to blame.

Kai lay in the bed, staring blankly at the ceiling. Every now and then, he'd jerk his arms, tugging at the restraints that bound his wrists. His legs were elevated, but they hadn't bothered to tie them, since Kai's ability to move them was so limited right now anyway.

"Kai," Jon said, so many emotions swirling he couldn't begin to parse them all out.

"Jon?" Kai said, trying to push up to see his brother, but he couldn't. Frustrated, he pulled at the restraints again, screaming.

"Shh, easy, Kai. It's OK. I'm here now."

"Jon—" Kai choked out. Jon could see Kai's eyes were red, and his chest was heaving.

Perplexed, Jon maintained his calm and smoothed Kai's forehead. "I'm here."

"She left."

"Nikki? She'll be back later."

"No. No." Kai's fingers curled over and over, like they wanted to sign away some of his anxiety. "She's gone, Jon." Kai's eyes found Jon's, so round and full of despair. "She left me a note."

Jon had never seen Kai like this; it terrified him, because it reminded him too much of their mother—especially in light of some of the things Kai had said earlier, about the transplant being a mistake. Her lows could last for days, and sometimes she'd lock herself in the spare bedroom, alternating between sobbing and throwing things.

Hesitantly, Jon freed one of Kai's hands, shifted the guard out of the way, and perched on the edge of the bed, cradling his brother's head in his lap.

"Why?" Kai asked. "Why does everyone leave me?" Kai began to sob, murmuring names Jon could barely discern, although he was certain his own was among them.

"Shh, Kai. I won't leave you again. I promise. I will always be here for you. Always." Jon added in a whisper, "I shouldn't have left you tonight; I'm so sorry."

"I wanted to hurt myself. So bad. Still do." Kai reached for Jon with his free hand. "Help me, please, Jon. I have to stop it. I can't think. Everything's too loud." Kai was trembling, hyperventilating, on the brink of a panic attack.

"It's OK, Kai. Come on, deep breaths for me. Try to relax." Jon smoothed Kai's hair with one hand while he called the nurse with the other. "Tell me what I can do," Jon said, hoping getting Kai to talk would help.

"Rubber band." Kai could barely speak now as his breaths came in panting gasps. "Can't breathe. Jon. Help."

The nurse Jon had spoken to earlier came in, looking nervous. Her face paled when she saw Kai was partially loose.

"I need a nebulizer and albuterol. Now," Jon commanded. Kai was wheezing, a pained, desperate sound Jon hadn't heard since before Kai's transplant.

"But—"

"Just get it!" Jon barked, wishing he had Kai's inhaler on him. "And rubber bands."

The nurse blinked, but had learned her lesson and didn't question Jon's orders, rushing out the door. Jon released Kai's other hand from its restraint and gripped them both tightly.

"Kai, focus on me. Breathe. Come on. In. . . . Out. . . . In. . . . Out."

Kai's shoulders bucked as he worked hard for each breath, in full panic. The minutes stretched, until finally, the nurse returned with the nebulizer. While she connected it and started the compressor, Jon fixed the mask on Kai's face.

"Come on, Kai, breathe that, relax," Jon cooed.

Kai's eyes drifted shut, but the mask fogged with each breath, and after a few seconds, his breathing grew quieter, less panicked.

"Uh, the psych consult wants to talk to you," the nurse said, dumping the rubber bands in Jon's hand.

Jon grunted, but nodded, adjusting the bed slightly so he could help Kai shift to his side. It was better for him to be upright, but Jon didn't want to risk causing a sudden plunge in Kai's BP that could make him pass out.

Jon slipped several rubber bands onto Kai's right wrist, since his left had the hospital ID bracelet.

Kai still seemed out of it, but having to focus on breathing and the soothing effect of the albuterol seemed to have ameliorated the panic attack. Kai's fingers slipped under the bands, then he tested them, flicking each in turn, then in unison. Soon, he settled into a rhythm, the sound of rubber hitting skin making its own staccato beat. It twisted Jon's stomach to see the vacant look in Kai's eyes as he flicked and flicked and flicked, like a child rocking in place.

But he was calmer. That was what mattered.

"It's OK," Jon said, smoothing Kai's hair and glancing at the monitors to check Kai's

vitals.

Flick. Flick. Flick.

Jon pulled out his phone and dialed Dr. Miller. It was early; not even five AM, but Jon figured he'd leave her a message, and hopefully she'd get it first thing.

Jon had just finished explaining, succinctly, that Kai was an inpatient because of his blood pressure, but had had a breakdown, and could she call him back ASAP. Kai had curled into a kind of fetal position, still flicking the bands in a slow, steady rhythm, moaning quietly. Jon realized the position wasn't ideal for his injured leg, and it must be hurting him. Jon slipped the mask off, setting it aside. Kai barely reacted, focused on the rubber bands.

The resident from earlier entered, scowling when he saw Kai's position, clearly free, his frown deepening with each flick of the rubber band.

"Dr. Taylor, your brother was trying to harm both himself and others. Showing signs of psychosis. For his safety, we should move him to a ward where the staff is trained to deal with a patient like him." The resident glared at the abandoned restraints. "And he should be restrained until we can medicate him safely, for his own protection."

"We're not doing anything until I speak to his psychiatrist."

The resident looked indignant.

Kai started muttering, "Please. I'll be good, I promise." He grabbed his legs, trying to pull them into a tighter tuck, but screamed as the movement irritated his bad leg. Now he was hyperventilating again, clearly terrified and confused.

Jon tried his best to calm Kai, not enjoying the smug sense of satisfaction on the resident's face. "Go away," Jon told the psych resident, "now."

"I'm calling my attending," the resident responded, almost like a little kid whining he was telling his mom as he strode out the door.

"You do that," Jon said dismissively, all his focus on Kai, who was struggling to breathe again, his flicking wavering as his hands shook uncontrollably.

"Please don't let her lock me up," Kai said, his voice small and strained, filled with pure fear. Was he talking about Dr. Miller committing him? "I'll be good. I won't throw up. I won't fall. I promise."

Jon sighed, worry swirling in his gut. Low blood pressure, even as low as Kai's had gotten, even as tenuous as it was right now, couldn't explain this level of confusion. "Kai, it's Jon. I'm right here. No one is locking you anywhere."

Kai turned his head and looked at Jon, blinking a few times. "Jon?"

Jon nodded, relieved Kai's breathing had regulated and that his brother recognized him. For a nervous second, Jon had feared Kai might not. Jon smoothed some hair out of Kai's face. He was soaked in sweat, his skin clammy. Jon glanced up at the monitor; Kai's last BP reading wasn't bad, but in this position, it wasn't necessarily accurate.

Just then, the cuff began to inflate. It seemed to catch Kai by surprise, and he flailed his arm. The monitor beeped an error, tried again. Kai started to panic as the cuff tightened, reaching to pull it off, screaming. Jon jumped in to try to subdue Kai, but God, even still recovering from the major attack and all those drugs, he was *strong*. *Maybe I should take up Kai's offer to work out with him next time he asks*, Jon thought as he struggled to hold Kai's arms.

"Kai. Calm down. It's OK."

Kai was crying hysterically now, only half-heartedly fighting Jon, as if he'd been lost in his panic and forgotten what he had been struggling against. His cries turned back to sobs, dissolving into despair again.

"Everyone leaves me. Everyone."

Jon took a deep breath, relieved to see a slightly calmer Kai, even if it meant a return to the beginning. Jon lay down beside his brother, cradling him tightly against his body as he had when Kai was a child.

He put his mouth near Kai's ear, struggling to remember the words to an old lullaby he used to sing to Kai years ago, when his breathing or MLS were particularly bad. "Close your eyes. . . . Try to sleep. . . . Though the dark is scary. . . . And tries to creep. . . . Your brother is with you. . . . He'll keep you safe. . . . From the darkness. . . . Till you wake."

Kai continued to cry, but he linked his free hand in Jon's and squeezed.

They lay like this, Kai clinging tightly to Jon, sobbing quietly, for a long time. Jon drifted.

He woke up about thirty minutes later, when the timid nurse from earlier shook him.

"Dr. Taylor, it's shift change." Then she added, clearly amazed, "You calmed him."

Jon nodded, carefully extracted himself from Kai, and stretched.

"I need to turn him; I should have done it half an hour ago, but . . ."

Jon nodded, glanced at his brother. Jon could see where tears had left tracks on Kai's cheeks, and even in sleep, he seemed anxious, tense.

"I'll deal with him if he wakes," Jon added. "I'll help you."

Together, they moved Kai onto his back, buffering him with pillows, making sure his legs were elevated, his right leg supported. As an added precaution, they secured his left wrist. Kai woke suddenly as they were finishing, in clear panic, obviously confused.

Jon gripped Kai's free hand tightly. "Kai, it's OK. You're in the hospital. For your blood pressure. Do you remember?"

Kai tugged at his restrained wrist, looking down at it, frantic, then desperately tried to pull his hand from Jon's grip.

"Kai. Look at me."

Kai jerked his wrists again, but obeyed.

"You've been confused. Having panic attacks. You were trying to hurt yourself." Jon spoke slowly. He noticed the nurse edging out toward the door in his peripheral vision, so he nodded to signal she could go.

"Jon . . ." Kai's eyes were glossy, like fresh tears were ready to bubble up. In this moment, Kai reminded him so painfully of their mother. "She left."

Jon took in a cautious breath. "Yes."

"But you're here."

"Yes."

"You sang to me."

Jon laughed, a little embarrassed. "I did."

Kai squeezed Jon's hand. "I still want to hurt myself."

"I won't let you."

Fresh tears slid down Kai's face. "I'm crazy, aren't I? They . . . wanted to lock me up."

"You've been confused. And angry. And scared. But you'll be OK. You'll get better."

Kai shook his head, and went back to snapping the rubber bands, as if trying to calm himself that way.

Jon watched him. He'd wait for Dr. Miller's assessment, but if this was a sign Kai was like their mother. . . . Jon struggled to remember his psych block. He knew schizophrenia often manifested in the early twenties. Was it the same for bipolar disorder? Would Kai, if he continued to have issues with hypotension, be able to take any kind of mood-stabilizing or anti-anxiety drugs?

Snap. Snap. Snap. Snap.

Kai was focused on his rubber bands, so he didn't notice when the second nurse arrived. But Jon did. A male nurse. Built. It made Jon nervous. He'd learned first hand how strong Kai could be when he was panicking. It was likely this nurse had been assigned to Kai for a reason.

"Kai? I'm Josh. I'll be your nurse today."

"Don't take my rubber bands. Please."

Josh looked from Kai to Jon. "They give him an outlet for his anxiety."

Josh nodded, approached slowly. "I'm going to give you something. It should help." He

held up a syringe, his other hand, fingers splayed, in a pacifying gesture.

"What are you giving him?"

"Diazepam. Valium. A low dose. Dr. Miller's orders."

"Jon?" Kai looked at his brother, his voice that small, scared one.

"It's OK. Let him inject you. It'll help you relax."

Kai gripped Jon's hand tight. Josh lifted the blanket and quickly injected Kai in his thigh.

"All done. You should start feeling it in a few seconds."

Josh busied himself checking and recording Kai's vitals. By the time he finished, Kai's grip had weakened, the tension in his body eased, and his lids dropped.

Nervous, Jon checked the monitor, but Kai's blood pressure held.

Before he could say anything, Josh spoke. "I'll be back a little later to give him his morning meds. Dr. Miller should be by soon."

"Benzodiazapene withdrawal. I should have thought of that," Jon said, pulling his hand through his hair. He was standing just outside Kai's room with Dr. Miller, who had explained most of Kai's erratic behavior was likely the result of his body's physiologic dependence on the Valium he'd developed over the past few weeks. "He was fine when I left him twelve hours ago, though."

Dr. Miller nodded. "Benzodiazapene withdrawal can set in within only a few hours in some people; in others, it can take days. Twenty-four to forty-eight hours is typical, but every patient is different." Dr. Miller frowned, glancing into Kai's room before returning her attention to Jon. "Dr. Gates had Kai on very high dosages, and even though he'd weaned him down, and it wasn't a very long period in which he was on those high dosages, it was enough, especially since Kai's taken diazepam in some form nearly his entire life. Cutting Kai off so abruptly and completely was a mistake."

Jon peeked in the room. They'd decided to leave Kai's wrists secured for now, until they were certain he wouldn't wake in a panic. Once Dr. Miller had been sure that a low infusion of diazepam would not lower Kai's blood pressure significantly, she'd started him on one, and it was keeping him calm enough that he'd been sleeping for the past hour.

"I was concerned he might . . ." Jon sighed. "Our mother was bipolar. She . . ." Jon looked around, lowered his voice. "She attempted suicide several times."

Dr. Miller took in a breath. "Kai never mentioned this."

Jon pushed his fingers through his hair, gripping the strands tightly. "He doesn't know. In light of everything, I've been meaning to tell him, but . . ."

Dr. Miller folded her arms on her chest and leaned in the doorway. "I don't think telling him, not at this stage, would be advisable. But Kai isn't bipolar." She turned back to Jon, gesturing with two fingers. "Bipolar disorder is characterized by two primary moods: mania and depression. During a mania, the patient is filled with euphoria, a sense of invincibility, often engaging in risky and impulsive behavior. During lows, the patient experiences intense despair, sometimes anger. These highs and lows last days, even weeks or months."

"Kai's problem isn't so much with mood instability as his inability to accept his often healthy, normal emotional reactions."

Jon fidgeted, rubbed his eyes. His blood sugar was low. He could feel it. He pulled out one of the meal bars he'd brought with him and started nibbling on it. "So what are you thinking?"

"There's little doubt he's suffering from PTSD. Initially, I was considering Borderline Personality Disorder, but he doesn't fulfill all of the diagnostic criteria. Assuming today was truly a result of withdrawal, anxiety is Kai's primary problem."

Jon sighed, chewing. "It's been a long time since my psych block."

"Kai struggles with his emotions; he often feels they're overwhelming, or that he's wrong for feeling them. That's where most of his urges to self-harm come from. His anxiety exacerbates the situation. For example, something upsets him, and he feels guilty for feeling upset. The guilt

makes him want to self-harm, and wanting to self-harm makes him feel ashamed. Feeling ashamed makes him want to self-harm even more, which leads to feelings of self-loathing, and his anxiety ratchets up, spinning him into a vicious cycle, often developing into a full-out panic attack.”

A dull hypoglycemic headache began to throb behind Jon’s eyes. It was a relief to hear Kai wasn’t taking after their mother, that today’s episode was a fluke, but Jon had seen the self-inflicted wounds riddling Kai’s torso, and his panic attacks and nightmares must have been bad enough to push him toward voluntary therapy with Dr. Miller. God, how bad had things been for Kai all those years they were separated? Years Kai never, ever talked about.

“His therapy is going well, but it will take time. Because of his blood pressure, pharmaceuticals are almost entirely off the table, but I’m going to try him on hydroxyzine as something he can take, symptomatically, to help with his anxiety.”

“An antihistamine?”

Dr. Miller smiled faintly. “It’s been shown to be effective as an anxiolytic, it won’t affect his blood pressure, and it has almost no side effects. It can also work immediately, and he doesn’t need to take it regularly to get benefits from it. I’m hopeful getting his anxiety managed will help with some of his other symptoms.” She glanced over her shoulder. “I’m going to talk to him.” Dr. Miller hesitated. “Fear of abandonment is another issue Kai really struggles with. Your support is essential to helping him through all this.”

“Of course. Kai is the most important person in my life; anything I can do to help him, I will.”

Dr. Miller held out her hand; she had a surprisingly strong handshake. “I know Kai isn’t the most naturally forthcoming person, but reminding him that you’re there if he needs you is important. Validating his emotions—assuming he doesn’t try to disguise or suppress them around you—can also really help.”

“Kai?”

Kai blinked groggily at Dr. Miller. His blood pressure had stabilized some, so he was able to sit up a little, though his right leg was kept bent. “Dr. Miller?” He seemed to realize his wrists were restrained, but instead of panicking, he just looked at her, his eyes sad. “You’re here to commit me?”

Dr. Miller offered a small smile, shaking her head. “You had a bad reaction to having the Valium suddenly cut off. How are you doing now?”

He blinked a few times. “I didn’t hurt anyone, did I? I remember being scared. Angry. Upset.” He took in a breath. “Nikki left me.”

“No, you didn’t. And I heard about Nikki. I’m sorry. Do you want to talk about it?”

“She said she loved me.”

“Do you love her?” Dr. Miller worked on freeing Kai’s wrists.

Kai shook his head. Once his hands were free, he used the bed guard to pull himself onto his left side, curling into as much of a fetal position as his right leg would allow. “I just want to go home.”

“Soon. How’s your mood?”

“I want to curl up in a ball and sleep forever.”

“Because if you’re sleeping, you don’t have to deal with your problems?”

Kai hesitated, first shrugged, then nodded weakly.

“But you feel calmer than before? Less anxious?”

Kai nodded. “I’m tired.”

“Get some sleep. I want to talk to you later. Once you’ve gotten some rest and are a bit more settled.”

“Jon?”

“He’s outside. I’ll send him in. Consider talking to him. He really cares about you. Going

through all of this might be easier on you both if you'd let him in."

"Hey, little brother," Jon said with a smile, perching on the edge of the bed.

Kai reached back blindly for Jon, who slipped his hand into his brother's.

"I should be able to take you home in a few hours, if Dr. Miller clears you."

"Thank you," Kai said in a weak voice.

"Thank Dr. Miller—"

"No." Kai tugged on his brother's hand. Jon didn't understand. "I want to sign."

Jon rose, crossed to the other side of the bed, so he could see Kai's face.

"*Thank you for taking care of me.*" Kai signed slowly, whether a side effect of the Valium or to help Jon understand, Jon wasn't sure. "*Bad stuff happened to me when we were separated.*"

Jon hesitated, then awkwardly finger spelled Dr. Miller's name, continuing in sign, "*Dr. Miller told me you have PTSD, but she didn't tell me . . . everything. You don't need to tell me. It's OK.*"

Kai smiled tiredly. "*I struggle talking even with Dr. Miller. But we're all we have, right? Today proved I need to trust you.*"

Jon took in a breath, looked around. Then he lifted up his shirt and pushed down the waist of his scrub pants and boxers, revealing the scar along the edge of his psoas muscle. He knew faint white circles, evenly spaced, were visible on both sides of the scar, the remainder of the numerous stitches he'd needed to close the wound.

Kai's fingers reached toward the mark, but stopped short of touching Jon's skin. His eyes tracked up to Jon's.

Jon dropped his shirt. "After we were separated, I thought you were dead. I blamed myself." Jon sighed. "*You and I may have different reasons for why we did this, but I know what it feels like, thinking cutting is the only way to make the dark thoughts stop,*" Jon signed, finger spelling when he couldn't think of the sign. "*I haven't since I was a teenager, but I've thought about it. Especially when you were so sick last year.*"

"Jon . . ."

"I should have told you before. *I'm sorry.*"

Kai's eyes were glossy. "*Thank you. Knowing I'm not alone really helps. Because I feel alone so much.*"

Jon grinned, took Kai's hand and squeezed it. "You're never getting rid of me again," he said, blinking away his own tears. "I'll always be here for you. *Always.*"

A few hours later, Kai was sitting up in bed, his eyes on the TV that hung from the ceiling, though Dr. Miller sensed it was merely something to focus on, and he wasn't really watching, especially since the volume was muted.

"Kai. How are you feeling?"

He smiled sadly, blinked rapidly a few times, swallowed, all without turning his head.

"My blood pressure's finally stable, so now it's up to you to decide how crazy I am."

Dr. Miller grabbed a chair and dragged it to Kai's bedside. "Kai, we've talked about that word."

Kai sighed and turned off the TV, finally looking her way. He seemed defeated, tired, worn; not much better than a few hours earlier, though he was more of himself. "Call it whatever you want; give me a bunch of fancy acronyms. I'm still crazy. If it weren't for Jon, I'd be in the psych ward right now." He let his eyes slide shut.

"And you think you belong there?"

Kai shrugged. "You're the expert."

Dr. Miller gave Kai a moment, processing her own thoughts. "Jon told me that earlier, when you were suffering from the withdrawals, you kept begging him not to let 'her' lock you up.

He assumed you meant me, but that isn't what you meant, is it? Do you remember that?"

Kai barely breathed over the next few seconds. "You're really good," he said, almost as if to himself. "You've seen through me since the moment I walked through your door. First shrink who has."

"Seeing me was also your choice, remember that. That's made a huge difference. But you're avoiding my question."

Kai cracked a half smile. "See: good." He sighed, finally opened his eyes again. "I don't remember this morning that well." He turned to face her. "Really. That's not an avoidance strategy. I remember how I felt more than what I said or did."

Dr. Miller nodded. "Earlier this week, you mentioned your aunt sometimes locked you in the bathroom."

Kai sucked in a breath. "Sometimes?" He blew air harshly out of his nose. "At first, it was just for when I was really bad. But then she got more and more disgusted with me, and it happened more often." Kai's fingers bunched the sheet into a tight knot. "'Dirty things belong in the bathroom,' she'd say."

Dr. Miller observed the casual, almost bored way Kai spoke, though, as usual, his hands betrayed his tension. Definitely his "tell."

"It wasn't so bad, most of the time. I didn't have to worry about making her mad if I was there, and it meant she wasn't yelling at me. And it meant she wasn't getting rid of me."

"How long did she leave you there, Kai?"

He shrugged without looking up. "A few hours. Sometimes overnight." Kai rolled his head back to neutral, staring vacantly ahead.

"It's OK, Kai."

Kai coughed out a laugh. "It wasn't usually scary. Being locked up. I mean, hospitals and institutions aren't exactly bastions of freedom. Especially if getting up and walking out isn't an option." He pulled on one of the wrist restraints still attached to the bed before tossing it aside, continuing in a disaffected tone, "And the room was small enough I could manage even when she took my braces or crutches."

"Did that happen often?"

"Regularly. I fell a lot that summer." Kai shrugged, though Dr. Miller noticed he hadn't even glanced sideways at her in the last ten minutes. "Builds character, right?"

Kai was silent a long time, but Dr. Miller observed his heart rate on the monitor spiked. Not enough to set off an alarm, but enough that Dr. Miller could confirm his calm exterior was just that: a facade.

"Kai, you keep saying things like 'most of the time' or 'not usually.' That implies that it was scary some of the time."

Kai didn't respond, but he lowered his gaze, staring at his hands, which continued to twist the sheets in his lap.

"Remember what we talked about? Not being ashamed of our emotions, even if they are a decade's-old fear?"

Kai inhaled sharply, kept his eyes cast downward. "One night, I made her really mad. Really, really mad. I can't remember why. Maybe I threw up on her. Maybe I fell and broke something of hers. I don't know." Kai closed his eyes tightly; his breathing faster and shallower, but not nearing panic. "She was so angry. I thought she was going to beat me. I wanted her to hit me. It would have been better." Kai's breathing became more erratic, though he seemed otherwise calm, apparently trying to get himself under control. His fingers went to the rubber bands he still wore on one wrist, but he didn't snap them.

"Why would that have been better?"

Kai shook his head. His breathing had slowed, but not his heart rate, though he still stared vacantly. "Because hitting me would have meant she cared enough to hurt me." Kai fell silent, and Miller gave him the time. She'd have to question him more about that statement

later. "That night, I was convinced she was finally going to get rid of me. I cried so hard I could hardly breathe, until I finally fell asleep."

Kai lowered the bed, then pulled himself onto his left side, hissing reflexively as he shifted his right leg, resuming the semi-fetal position of earlier, his back to Dr. Miller. "*I want to curl up and sleep forever,*" he'd told her. Especially with the way the position hurt his bad leg, it was obvious to her he hadn't chosen it for physical comfort. She could imagine a scared ten-year-old Kai, curled up much like this on the floor of a tiny bathroom, crying himself to sleep.

"If you think I'm too crazy to go home, just tell me. Now that my blood pressure's stable, they can zonk me out." His voice was calm, but she saw the subtle shake of his shoulders.

Dr. Miller rose, crossed to the other side of the bed. She saw tears tracing down Kai's face. He looked up at her for a brief moment, a mere fraction of a second, and in that instance she saw the fear and anguish of the young boy he remembered being, whom he still felt like more than he was willing to admit, even to her. Then he ducked his head, burying his face.

"Please don't look at me."

She contained her sigh. "Kai, I know you want to go home today. I think it's important for you to talk about this before you do." She retook her seat, taking her time, giving Kai the chance to formulate his thoughts.

"It was dark and cold and claustrophobic in that bathroom," Kai finally admitted in a small voice. "I woke up in the middle of the night in the midst of an attack, struggling to breathe." Kai pulled his left leg in tighter, almost hugging it to his chest, as if trying to make himself as small as possible. "At night, with the light off and door shut, that room was pitch black, and I panicked. I had been breathing well the last few months, and I'd never had an attack when I didn't have my medicine."

"What happened?"

Kai's calm facade began to crumble. "I couldn't breathe, and I was trapped, and it was so dark, and I was so cold. And so alone." Kai sucked in a harsh breath, his words tinged with emotion, jarring after his monotone of earlier. "It was the first time death became real."

"Real?" Dr. Miller asked, hoping Kai wouldn't freeze up on her; she sensed they were on the verge of a breakthrough.

Kai's heart was racing; Dr. Miller was shocked a nurse hadn't yet come in to check on him. But he cleared his throat, tried to find his calm again. "Because I could not stop for death, he kindly stopped for me," Kai quoted. Then he used his arms to roll himself onto his back, carefully arranging his legs, almost as if it gave him an excuse to stall.

After several minutes, Dr. Miller conceded reluctantly, "If you're not ready to talk about this now, we can pick up next time."

Kai inhaled, shook his head. "Death has always been my co-pilot," he said sardonically. "But I didn't understand it, not really, till that night. For years, I believed my parents were alive; they'd simply decided they didn't want me. Not being able to breathe was always scary, but I didn't really fully, consciously understand what would happen if I stopped breathing." Kai breathed slowly, deeply, for a few minutes, one hand on the side of his neck, as if trying to still his rampaging heart. "That night, it hit me. Trapped in a small, dark place, alone, fighting for air, trying to scream and not being able to. It was like . . ." Kai searched for the words, speaking slowly as realization hit. ". . . being buried alive. Oh. Oh. Fuck." Kai let his head drop to one side, a hand over his mouth, that vacant stare reappearing.

Dr. Miller had to give the kid some credit; that was the kind of connection even an experienced therapist might not make instantly. "The fact that you've been able to find some origin for even your more abstract nightmares is a good way to try to overcome them," Dr. Miller offered.

"Yeah," Kai said, skeptical. "Because I figured out being buried alive is my brain's fun metaphor for nearly asphyxiating in a dirty bathroom when I was ten, I'll sleep soundly from here on out. Thanks, doc."

"Kai—"

He took a deep breath. ". . . I'm sorry." Kai rolled his neck to look at her. "I'm just . . . I'm tired of being scared. I'm tired of being panicky and anxious. I'm tired of the side effects of one drug making me take another, which has more side effects, and none of them really work. I'm tired of my blood pressure being unstable. I'm tired of feeling like I can never get my life on track, because some new surprise pops up. I'm tired of feeling out of control." He swallowed. "I miss Nikki."

"But you don't love her?"

Kai hesitated a moment, as if giving the question serious thought. "No. But I . . . I could be myself with her, even as fucked up as that is. I could escape with her. Forget. She helped me deal."

Dr. Miller nodded. "I want to see you first thing on Monday. I'd like to meet with you daily this week. I want to start implementing some behavior modification therapy in conjunction to what we've already been doing to work on getting your emotions and anxiety better managed."

Kai stared at her for a long moment, studying her. "If you think I'm going to hurt myself again, why are you letting me go home?"

Dr. Miller couldn't help letting a slim smile escape. Apparently, Kai could see through her, too. "Because I think holding you could potentially do more harm to your recovery than good. Take the hydroxyzine to manage your anxiety. Talk to your brother. And call me if you need to." She rose. "Sleeping with a light on, if you don't already, may help with the nightmares. Feel better. I'll see you Monday."

From Kai's Journal #1 - Early Fall 2000

So Dr. Miller told me I'm crazy.

Ha. Dr. Miller would never say that. You could have a full psychotic breakdown in the checkout lane of the Walmart and she'd say, "You're simply struggling with your concept of reality. Let's talk about this and see how we can help you work through it."

What she actually told me is that I have Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and a panic disorder, too, along with a whole spiel about how I need to learn to accept the validity of my emotions and not be afraid or ashamed of them. No fancy acronyms there, but then my psychiatric alphabet soup is already pretty full. Lucky me.

I guess the good thing is she's confident I can "get better." The rest of my life doesn't have to be ruled by nightmares and panic attacks and emotional breakdowns. Fuck, I'm even starting to sound like her.

That's why I'm writing this journal. Part of my "therapy."

A preferable alternative to Dr. Miller's initial suggestion when she diagnosed me: group therapy. I laughed at her. Then I apologized for laughing at her. Then I said, "No fucking way."

It's been hard enough for me to talk to her about all this. I still struggle with Jon. He deserves to know, but. . . . Anyway, I'm not going to tell a room of complete strangers about my aunt. The things she . . . did to me. The things I *let* her do to me. . . .

Deep breath, Kai.

I'm not supposed to dwell.

Some of Dr. Miller's tips have actually really helped. One suggestion she made was when I feel like my emotions are getting out of control, I should suck on a really sour candy, and focus on the flavor and the texture as it slowly dissolves on my tongue. It's a way to get my brain unhinged from the crazy loop. Not that Miller would call it a "crazy loop."

It helps. Sometimes.

The hydroxyzine helps, too.

I have nightmares only once a week now. And I haven't had a full-blown panic attack in a couple weeks.

I finally sucked it up and went to Disability Services and got tested, so now I get extra time during exams. Yay me. I also went and talked to all my professors. Decided to withdraw from psychology and philosophy. Turns out, at least for psych, it might work out better, since the professor says he has a small section next semester that usually has only a handful of students. He said I might benefit from the smaller class size. And my history and writing professors have been really understanding about why I've been struggling and why I've missed so much class. They've each given me some makeup assignments to do so I can try to improve my grade. I actually already have an idea of how I'm going to tackle my English comp assignment. I'm going to do what she's wanted me to do all along: be honest. It's kind of scary, talking about myself and everything I've gone through. Well, not *everything*, but everything I'm willing to tell a relative stranger, anyway. Dr. Miller says it's a really good step for me.

Hmph. Steps.

My leg's been healing pretty well. Troy's been letting me use some of the equipment even when I'm not in PT, since I'm not allowed to swim yet. Micovic says there's no way to control the flexion of my knee in the water, and even with reduced gravity and all that, he says it's too big a risk. It's still not clear if I'll walk again, but Micovic thinks I can start working on weight bearing soon, and my MLS has been relatively controlled lately, so I guess that's something.

Jon and Vicky are doing well. It's nice to see him happy. I've been trying to balance being more forthcoming with him. After I went apeshit in the hospital because I was off the Valium, and he fought for me . . . I realized he deserves to be "let in." The fact that he defended and

protected and consoled me without knowing everything, without demanding to know. . . . In some ways, that means more to me than anything else he's done for me. But, at the same time, I'm trying to take care of myself physically and emotionally so I don't ruin things for him with Vicky. I've sabotaged enough relationships—my own and his—that I don't want to do that again. Jon deserves happiness. And so does Vicky, for that matter.

I've come to terms with Nikki. I mean . . . I don't know what things would be like if she showed up again, but . . . it's not like Becca. Dr. Miller's helped with that. But I don't want another Becca, and Nikki wasn't—isn't—Becca. Nikki's sent me a few postcards, always from a different place. She doesn't write much, but it feels like it's her way of letting me know she's thinking of me. I still miss her—not just the sex, though, fuck, I miss that—but even though I try to be more honest and open with Jon, and he's been great, really, it's not . . . the same.

I still feel alone. Lonely. Dr. Miller says I've isolated myself as a defense mechanism. Though she's suggested I stay away from romantic relationships for a while, she says I need to “socialize” more. I'm convinced she and Jon are in league to get me back in the local Deaf Community, but they don't understand. I'm not part of that anymore. I'm just some hearie now. Besides, it'd dredge up the past, and “past” is something I don't handle well.

Though I did give in to Dr. Miller's suggestion that I return to County House. Facing a part of my past will make it easier to face the rest, she said. I was reluctant at first; David and I had always promised each other we wouldn't even spit on that place again, once we aged out, but. . . . I called up Ms. Cathy, offered to take the kids trick-or-treating at the hospital. That way I can't back out later. There's no way I'll disappoint those kids, no matter how anxious the whole prospect makes me.

And then there's Renee. . . . I've been avoiding her. It's been . . . weeks. I just . . . I plan my arrival and departure from class so I don't have to see her. And the few times I notice she's waiting for me, I skip, because I just . . . can't. I know it's not realistic in the long term, but . . . Dr. Miller's pretty disapproving of the way I've handled the whole Renee situation. She thinks it's unhealthy to avoid Renee, that avoiding my problems is at least partially what got me where I am in the first place.

I just feel like my life is this intricate card tower and Renee is that final piece that will either make it perfect or send it disastrously to the ground, in pieces, and I may never be able to put it back together again.

And I'm just not sure I want to take that risk.

October 26, 2000

Jon was hurriedly scrawling orders into a chart, leaning on the counter of the main nurses' station of the pulmonology floor of Jonesville Memorial when a stack of new charts landed with a thump off to his side. He glanced up to see Jo, looking serious.

"I went through and prioritized for you. You should head to these patients next."

"Thanks, Jo," Jon said, filing his current chart and sliding the pile over to investigate. "I can't remember it being this busy in awhile."

"That time of year: beginning of flu and pneumonia season."

"And time for me to start getting nervous about Kai," Jon said in a low voice, skimming through the first patient's file.

Jo laid a hand lightly on Jon's arm. "He's had the shot. He'll be OK. I've gotta run."

Jon offered a faint nod, forcing himself to focus on the paperwork in front of him so he wouldn't slip into a cycle of worry. He was far too busy to allow himself to be distracted. He was scooping up the charts when his phone rang. Probably one of the fellows, or even a med resident, with a question. Like he wasn't busy enough.

"Dr. Taylor," he said in his usual stern, professional tone.

"Uh, you're Kai's brother, right?" a nervous female voice said on the other end of the line. She spoke with a light, soft, unfamiliar accent.

Jon had a flash of dizzying déjà vu but forced himself to keep his voice level. "Yes."

He heard a harsh intake of breath on the other line. "I got your number from his voicemail. I didn't want to bother you, but . . ." Another breath, as if she were nervous. "We go to school together, and we were study partners, but Kai sort of fell off the map, and we have a big midterm coming up. And . . . I'm just starting to get worried about him. You wouldn't happen to know where I could find him?"

Jon shifted so he was leaning with his back against the counter, one arm on the stack of files, staring out at the bustling hall in front of him, though he wasn't really seeing it, lost in thought. This had to be Renee, a girl Kai talked about more than Jon thought his brother realized, and whom, Jon knew, Kai had been avoiding. In some ways, Kai had made a lot of progress, psychologically, since his Valium-withdrawal breakdown the month before, but in other ways, he was worse, and Jon had become concerned.

Kai rarely called Jake, the only one of Kai's friends who had visited him in the hospital before and after his transplant, and whom Kai normally spoke with regularly. Kai'd also refused Jon's efforts (via Megan, Jon's ASL tutor) to participate in any Deaf Community events. Kai went to class, physical therapy, and doctors' appointments, and nothing else. He never visited the diner anymore, or any of his other usual haunts, like Lost Apple or Nancy's Cafe, and though in some ways he'd been better at communicating with Jon, in others, he was more withdrawn than ever.

"Dr. Taylor? Are you still there?"

"Yes." Jon checked his watch; Kai would be working with Troy right now. If Jon sent Renee to PT, Kai would be furious, but Jon worried if he told Renee to meet Kai back home later, Kai wouldn't answer the door for her. He sucked in a breath, pushed his hand through his hair. "You'll find him in the Physical Rehabilitation Center; it's on your left when you enter Jonesville Memorial Hospital complex from the south entrance. You can't miss it."

Jon hung up on Renee's chorus of thank yous. Kai couldn't be mad at Jon forever, and maybe this would be the nudge that would push him out of the protective trench he'd buried himself in over the past few weeks.

The physical therapy facilities at Jonesville Memorial were enormous, far larger than Renee had expected, housed in their own building (although it was attached to the main hospital complex). It was late, past six-thirty, but Jon had told her she'd find Kai here, and after weeks of not seeing him at all, then finally getting glimpses of him in the far front row, yet never rushing down the steps fast enough before he wheeled out the door, she knew she had to talk to him. Her attempts to hangout in the front row, or dawdle in between classes had also failed miserably; this was her last shot. Even if meant an ambush. Even if it was only for five minutes. Even if what he told her was something she didn't want to hear.

She had so many questions, many of them revolving around his mysterious absence/disappearance followed by his quiet reemergence in that wheelchair. No matter how she timed her arrivals or departures, she never caught more than a glimpse of him. The wheelchair, the hint of a knee brace she'd seen, and the physical therapy all suggested surgery. But she could have sworn—even in her minor glimpses—that it was his right knee that seemed injured. Hadn't it been his left that was "bad"?

Though it looked dark through the main entrance doors, they were still open, so Renee pushed through anyway, her heart the accompaniment to her steps as they echoed over the floor. A large, open-plan waiting room beckoned her, so she headed that way, though the lights were dimmed for the night and it was eerily empty.

She heard shuffling and was so tense, hesitating about whether or not this was a mistake, that she nearly ran into someone. A short (by Iowa standards, though she still towered over Renee several inches) woman with a bobbed haircut and lilac scrubs, with a bungee on her wrist from which keys dangled and a large purse slung over one shoulder.

"Oh, we're closed for the day," she said, starting to guide Renee with her. "I hadn't had a chance to lock the front door yet."

"Uh, yeah. I'm actually supposed to wait for Kai Fox?" Renee lied, crossing her fingers behind her back. She wasn't an awful liar, but lying wasn't something she enjoyed. Her entire body buzzed with tension. She'd taken the bus here, since her car was in the shop and she didn't want Diane to question her motives or stop her. Renee didn't really have a plan B.

The woman's face transformed into a smile, appraising Renee suddenly as if she were a prize livestock in a competition. "Oh. I think he's still working with Troy. You *could* wait out here," the woman said, looking around, "but I wouldn't recommend it. Why don't you go on in, through that door over there." She pointed down the hall, gesturing toward the left. "That'll be open. Troy always locks that up when he leaves at the end of the day." The woman checked her watch. "They should be finished soon anyway."

Renee let out her held breath and nodded, not sure she could manage a word without her faux calm dissipating instantly. She raised her hand to wave to the woman as she departed, then power walked toward the back door. She didn't want to give the woman a chance to change her mind.

Renee could feel the blood coursing through her veins as she eased the indicated door open. To one side, she could see a row of what might have been offices, a hallway splitting off to somewhere else. A large doorway on her left opened up onto the physical therapy room, but she eased up to it, keeping her body mostly hidden for now, so she could get a sense of what to expect before rushing into the fray.

Her eyes took in the room. No, it was more like a gym, enormous, with high ceilings and subdivided into different stations. There was equipment she recognized, basically standard things like treadmills and stationary bikes, stuff she'd only seen in movies, and more she didn't recognize. Large overhead lights hung down, and Renee saw that most of them were shut off for the night, casting large areas of the room in shadow. Off to the right, quite a distance away in the large room, a set of parallel bars was bathed in light, and she could hear a pair of male voices, echoing in the enormous space.

Taking a breath, Renee quietly wove her way through a stand of weight equipment, finally finding a place she could pause to get her bearings, ducking behind some kind of upright contraption with pulleys that apparently raised the flat, book-like weights up when you pulled. It had a small gap through which she could see to the other side of the room, and she hoped the darkness, combined with the machine, would hide her from view for now.

Her cheeks were hot. What was she doing? She should have waited for him outside. She took a breath and forced herself to look across the room. The contrast in lighting created a sort of silhouette effect from here; she could see a man in shorts and a T-shirt, hands on the parallel bars, and another, standing off to one side. She listened carefully to their voices, which were more distinct now that she was closer and at less of an angle.

One was clearly Kai. No mistake. Renee took in a breath. She hadn't intended to sneak up on him, but it would be wrong of her to just pop out on him now, wouldn't it? Her heart thundered, her stomach clenched. The other man—the Troy the woman outside had mentioned, perhaps?—was speaking to Kai.

"So you finally got the fit right on your left leg?"

"Yeah. It's nice not feeling like my knee's going to dislocate every time I take a single, shuffling step." Kai's voice was strained; what he was doing was obviously taking a lot of effort.

"Right leg."

"This would be easier if my right ankle would help."

"Let the brace work for you, just like it does on the left."

Kai grumbled, managed to pull his right leg forward, clearly using his upper body to execute the move, his hands sliding along the bar, his shoulders jerking and straining with the movement. "My knee, too."

"Left leg," Troy said automatically. "You probably won't get your ankle back, but you might get your knee."

Kai's sigh echoed as he readjusted his hands on the bars and pulled his left leg forward. Even in outline, even at this distance, Renee could see the effort each small movement took, the tension in his arms, could hear Kai's panting breath as he paused between each laborious step.

"Right leg. Almost there," Troy coached. "In two or three years, it's possible we'll have smart orthotics that actually assist in bending the knee."

"Yeah, well, by the time those are commercial, the rate I'm going, I won't be walking anymore anyway."

"Left leg. You don't know that, Kai. Right leg."

Renee's eyes had adjusted, and she could see a little more of the two men, though no real details. She caught the gleam of metal on Kai's legs that suggested full leg braces, explaining why he'd moved so stiffly. Kai was nearly at the end of the bars. The other man stood nearby; he was short—at least compared to Kai—not even six foot, it appeared, but muscled. Even with the lighting, she could see he had a strong chest and arms. For that matter, so did Kai. Kai wasn't as visibly strong—at least not at a distance—his build leaner, longer, though no doubt powerful enough in his own right. Renee's stomach clenched further, and she sucked in a breath as she watched Kai pull himself to the end of the bars, the roll of his shoulder and arch of his hip as he dragged each leg forward.

"Need help turning?"

"Just make sure I don't fall."

Renee watched, feeling even more like a voyeur, as Kai shifted his hands on the bars, twisting his torso and using his upper body to pull his legs, awkwardly, one by one, until he'd shifted 90-degrees. It was clear his knees were locked, his legs fixed straight, making what would be a simple turn for anyone else far more complicated. He paused for a long moment, then, both hands on the left bar, his harsh breath echoing subtly in the cavernous space.

"I know it's your job to be a cheerleader, Troy," Kai said between panting breaths, "but we both know one more flare-up like this and . . ."

“Kai.”

Kai shook his head, then repeated the series of careful movements to complete the full about-face. Gripping the bar with one hand, he bent slightly, but she couldn't see what he was doing, though she noticed he wavered and had to increase his hold on the right bar, consciously shifting his body back to that side. He repeated the motion on his right as Troy pushed the wheelchair closer. She realized he'd unlocked his knees, and could see, despite his strong grip on the bars, he was now unstable. In a move that made her—despite herself—think of a gymnast, he dropped down, arms bracing on the bars, until he was settled back in his wheelchair, held secure by Troy.

Kai used his hands to pull his legs—which, to Renee's shock despite the scene she'd just witnessed—were apparently deadweight—one by one until his feet were settled on the footplate of his chair. She got a better view of the braces now; these weren't the temporary kind you saw someone wear after a knee injury—the kind she'd glimpsed him wear to class—but rather the full, FDR hardware she'd only seen in movies.

Crap. What to do now? She couldn't hide here forever, but popping out now might be worse than anything. Maybe she could try to sneak back the way she came. She could find another time to talk to him. Renee inched farther down the line of machines, carefully, quietly, back toward the door, pausing every few seconds. She wasn't sure what was wrong with Kai, but it was obviously more than just a “bad” leg. He must have had some way of minimizing it from her before, but today made it obvious; he was disabled.

Although nervousness still hummed through Renee, her mind cleared. Perhaps this explained some of his hesitancy. His mystery. Although she knew leaving and finding some other way to approach him was still best, she wanted to talk to him more than ever now, her curiosity and desire to know who Kai really was piquing. She decided to wait. At least a few more minutes.

“I'll go get you some ice,” Troy said, his tone shifted from before, chastened rather than authoritative or encouraging. Although Renee had heard everything, she suspected she'd missed part of an argument somewhere.

She tensed as she saw Troy jog away, towards her, but then she realized he was heading into that back hallway, and let out a breath of relief that she hadn't chosen then to make her escape.

Kai pushed tiredly to a stack of raised mats on level with the seat of his chair, and she watched him pull up to it until he was roughly parallel, his left side closer to the mats. He flicked something on his wheels, then levered himself onto the mats, lifting his legs with his hands one after the other slowly, carefully. Then he used his hands to pull himself back, his legs following, until they were stretched out on the surface in front of him. It was kind of eerie how still they were, how straight his feet remained.

With his hands, he adjusted his left leg until it was bent at the knee, removing his shoe. Now that they were a little closer to each other, Renee could see his left brace was entirely metal and leather, and what, from a distance, she'd assumed was his skin was actually a sock that covered his leg from toe to hip. His right brace was distinct from the left, solid leather on his knee and thigh but plastic on his calf. When he removed his shoes, she saw a piece of plastic rested against the bottom of each foot.

Once his shoes were off, he readjusted his legs again, working quickly to undo the myriad straps. Renee tried to tiptoe a little closer when she misjudged, her foot hit one of the machines, letting out a resonating clank.

Kai immediately stopped what he was doing and jerked his head up, looking around. She saw him note his chair nearby, perhaps calculating how fast he could get back into it, before surveying the rest of the room. “Troy?”

Renee could hardly hear anything except the thunderous beat of her heart in her ears. She swallowed. She could continue to cower, or she could own up and reveal herself.

“I don’t like to be snuck up on. You know that,” Kai called out.

Renee closed her eyes, took a breath, and stepped around the bank of machines, not stopping until she knew he could see her.

He blinked; his shoulders slumped for a moment before he pushed himself up, hands splayed on either side of his thighs. “Re—Renee?”

She swallowed, unable to speak, uncertain the tone of his voice. Was he angry? He certainly had every right to be. Finally, she managed a faint nod.

He turned his head to the side, and she could just make out his jaw working. Finally, he beckoned her closer.

Reluctantly, she crossed the gap, sinking down on the edge of the mat a few feet from him. She didn’t want to stare at his legs, but she didn’t think she could look at his face, either. She settled for keeping her eyes fixed on her lap, where she knotted her hands together.

“How’d you find me?”

“Your brother.”

She heard him let out a long, frustrated sigh. Then the subtle creak of leather and click of metal as he resumed unfastening the straps.

“How long have you been here?”

Renee shrugged without looking up. “Twenty minutes, maybe.”

He said nothing, though he seemed to be more violent with his work. She hazarded a look after a moment, and saw him lift his right leg out of the frame of the brace and lay it over a wedge pillow so the knee stayed partially bent. Then he moved onto the other, still saying nothing.

“I’m sorry,” she ventured after she couldn’t stand the silence, which she perceived as hostile, even if she couldn’t read his face when she finally allowed herself to look at it.

He sighed, but that was his only reaction. She noticed his left knee had more supports than his right, with several thin straps above and below it that his fingers worked to undo. It was strange, yet for some reason her own fingers itched to help him, to work the straps through the buckles so he could free his other leg faster. Instead, she buried them under her thighs.

“I just . . . you disappeared, and you were never around long enough in class when you were there for me to talk to you . . .”

“So you got my brother’s number from my voicemail and called him. I get it.” It amazed her how his tone could be flat, yet it was impossible to tell whether he was angry or not.

“I don’t normally make a habit of spying on people,” she said, trying to joke, “but the lady in the front told me to come in, and—”

“Sure,” he said curtly, cutting her off.

She shut up immediately, forcing her eyes to look at his upper body as he lifted his left leg out of its brace and set it aside. He was wearing a thin T-shirt, which, though not tight, clung to his body with sweat, outlining his shoulders, pecs, and drawing attention to his biceps. He looked even better up close than he had across the room; she could see the muscles working as he moved. The neck gaped in the front as he leaned over, his hands massaging his left knee, and she saw the hint of something, though it could have been a shadow, at the base of his throat.

“If you keep staring, I’ll have to start charging you,” he said again in that toneless voice, giving her no indication of whether he was teasing her or furious.

She sputtered an attempt at an apology.

He shrugged. “Crip’s out of the bag, huh?” He offered a smile, but it was faint, almost painted-on.

“I can just go,” she managed to say, realizing maybe she should have done that twenty minutes earlier and saved them both the embarrassment.

Before Kai could respond, Troy came back in, carrying some large ice packs. He did a doubletake when he saw Renee.

Kai accepted the ice, laying one large pack on his right thigh and the other on his left knee. “Troy Snow, this is Renee Poche, a . . . friend from school. Renee, Troy, my physical therapist.”

Renee offered her hand to shake.

“He’s also a sadist, so be careful,” Kai said, his voice still flat but hinting at mirth.

Troy laughed. “Ignore him; he’s always grumpy after PT. It’s nice to meet you.” They shook, Troy’s grip firm. “Fifteen minutes. You’ll be OK?” Renee noticed an extra arch in Troy’s brows, as if—again—more were being communicated between the two men than what was actually being said. “I’ll be in my office.”

“Yeah, I’ll see you Tuesday,” Kai said, his eyes darting to Renee for the briefest of instances, then catching the stopwatch Troy tossed at him. “I have that . . . thing, so I’ll be here earlier than normal.”

Troy nodded before leaving.

A moment later, Kai lay back, letting the watch rest on the plane of his belly. Through the still damp T-shirt, Renee could see suggestions of abs, inferring Kai’s stomach looked potentially as good as his arms and shoulders.

Once they were alone again, Kai spoke. “I’m tired, but ‘talk later’ hasn’t worked real well for us, so if you don’t mind heading back to my place after this, I’ll tell you whatever you want. Full 20 questions. Guess I owe you that much.”

Renee was surprised. “I’ve . . . missed you.”

Kai breathed in sharply, almost as if he were about to laugh and had stopped the sound at the last moment.

“So . . . you’re not mad?”

Kai stretched his arms, one at a time, over his chest. “Sure, I’m thrilled that you spent twenty minutes watching me drag my legs around.” Again, that toneless voice, though she knew the anger in it wasn’t imagined. “But the way my luck has been lately, I’m not surprised this is the way you finally found out about my MLS.”

“MLS?”

He checked the stopwatch, then let it fall back. “I didn’t get hurt in an accident, or have my knee blown out in football. My legs are the way they are because I have a disease called MLS. I was born with it.”

Renee’s brow wrinkled. “I’ve never—”

“Heard of it? Yeah, it’s pretty rare. I’m just lucky.”

He stretched his upper body a bit more, but didn’t speak, so Renee kept quiet, too. Even though Kai was being deliberately neutral, he was angry, she could feel it. He had every right to be, she thought, letting her eyes drift to his wheelchair, really seeing it for the first time. Now she could tell it wasn’t the bulky, boxy kind she was familiar with from hospitals, airports, and stores. This one was compact, the frame seemingly solid, with a fixed footrest and a low back. The frame was a dark-medium blue, and she could see the paint was scuffed off in some places, revealing the chrome beneath. Clearly, this wasn’t a temporary chair, and Kai had obviously had it for a few years at least.

“But you were walking fine the last time I saw you,” she blurted, thinking out loud. She cupped her hand over her mouth.

“Actually, I wasn’t,” Kai said, pushing himself back into a sitting position just as the timer went off. “But it’s all relative anyway.” He shut off the alarm and set the ice packs aside, rubbing his legs; she noticed he’d left on the long white socks, and that his left leg wasn’t as muscular as his right. He said nothing else as he started strapping his legs back into his braces.

“So . . . is it like MS, kinda, then?” She ventured. Things had always seemed so easy between them, even when Kai was being reserved and evasive. But this was different. The atmosphere seemed heavier, more bitter, and she wasn’t sure if it was her fault for intruding or if he’d changed somehow over the course of the past few weeks.

He sighed, finishing his left leg and moving to his right; she noticed his brow wrinkle as he lifted it from the wedge, a fleeting grimace as he slowly straightened it, laying it in the brace. “In the sense that my mobility can change from one day to the next, yes.” He hesitated, shook his head, then added, “Otherwise, no.”

She watched him struggle to get his feet in each shoe; with the footplate and the way the brace limited the movement of his legs, it wasn’t easy. Part of her wanted to offer to help, but somehow she knew that would be the wrong thing to do. Kai might not be happy with her right now, but he hadn’t sent her away, he was willing to let her come to his apartment to talk, and so that meant something. She didn’t want to shatter their fragile peace by saying or doing the wrong thing now.

Finally, his braces and shoes in place, he transferred back into his chair, one hand on the cushion and the other on the mat, arranging his feet and tossing the ice packs, wrapped in towels, in his lap, and putting the stopwatch around his neck.

“Come on. I gotta drop this stuff off first. We’ll go out the back.”

Renee nodded, walking hesitantly behind him as he wheeled toward the hallway from which she’d entered. It felt strange, seeing him so short, but she quickly grew distracted by his shoulders and arms as they moved with each push. He was clearly tired, but it was visible how powerful his upper body must be. Vaguely, in some back part of her mind, she knew she should be freaked out by it all, but oddly, she wasn’t. Seeing Kai like this—honest, vulnerable, strong—made her want him even more.

The cold night air hit Kai immediately as they exited the building, a reminder that winter would be here soon. It bit at Kai’s skin where his T-shirt still clung to his back with sweat, making him shiver reflexively. Jon would kill him if his brother knew he wasn’t wearing a sweatshirt or jacket, but it wasn’t far to the car. Besides, fuck Jon. Kai was still trying to wrap his head around Renee showing up like she had. A large part of him was furious, the anger burning like a fire under his skin, but another part was happy. He’d given up on even having a friendship with Renee, yet here she was.

“Where are you parked? I’ll walk you to your car.” Kai paused, waiting for her answer.

“Uh,” she said, hesitating. Renee toed the ground with one foot in a way he found disturbingly endearing.

“You need a ride.” Kai stifled a groan. He was tired and hurting and sweaty, and he just wanted to go home, shower, drink some Gatorade to make sure his BP didn’t crash, and crawl into bed.

“I mean, I can take the bus. It’s not a big deal.”

Kai shook his head. “Around here, the bus schedule gets a bit wonky after seven. Besides, I owe you an interview, don’t I?” He knew he was being snarky, but he couldn’t help it. It was his only way to let out some of his anger without allowing it to get out of control. And he didn’t want to do that to Renee. She clearly hadn’t surprised him to be malicious. She was obviously a sweet girl; it wasn’t her fault she was hung up on someone as fucked up as him.

“All right, if it’s not any trouble,” she offered, tucking a stray curl behind her ear.

Kai had to look away, turning his chair, trying to ignore the pleasant skip his heart made just from seeing her make such an innocent, inane gesture. He couldn’t do this, not now. They could be friends, maybe, but he had to get his own shit together—or at least moderately together—before he could think of anything more with Renee. The past few weeks had made that painfully clear.

“I’m in front. Come on.”

Kai rolled down a ramp, then took a shortcut through the staff parking lot toward the front of the physical rehabilitation building, releasing his pushrims every few feet and gliding so he could cast a quick glance over his shoulder to make sure Renee was following. Finally, with a sigh, he flicked his wrists and turned nearly 90 degrees.

“Walk beside me.”

“I’m sorry,” Renee said, sheepishly, rushing to catch up.

“It’s fine,” Kai said, struggling to keep the exasperation out of his voice. “Another female friend of mine was attacked the other day and I would just feel more comfortable if I could see you.” A queasy feeling filled Kai’s stomach at the thought of Nikki, whom he hadn’t heard from other than the occasional postcard. But she was the past, and he’d spent the last month alone. Maybe he could—. No. He quickly dismissed the thought.

“I’m sorry,” Renee muttered quietly, her voice almost lost to the light wind that tossed her curls. “I’ve never—I don’t—”

“It’s fine. Don’t trip me, and I won’t trip you. Deal?” Kai offered a real smile this time, felt a little of his anger fading as he remembered how much he’d wanted them to have a chance, so much he’d hidden all *this* from her. What a fucking mistake that’d been.

She smiled shyly back and they walked most of the rest of the way to the front of the PT complex in silence.

They finally reached the bank of handicapped spaces that fronted the building; Kai’s was the only car left at this time of night. He pushed toward it, and as he did, he heard Renee speak up again for the first time in minutes.

“Why didn’t you . . . tell me . . . before?” she ventured.

Kai sighed, unlocking the car on her side and pulling the door open for her. She smiled at the gesture and climbed in after a moment’s hesitation.

“You came here tonight because you wanted honesty, right?” Kai asked, a hand on the door.

She thought about it, then nodded.

“Here’s some honesty for you, then: nothing about me is simple. I don’t say that to be arrogant, just honest. I’m complicated. My past is complicated, my health . . . is complicated. Sometimes, simpler is easier.”

He shut the door, pushed around to the other side of the car, and transferred, careful not to bump his right leg on the steering wheel or hand controls. He popped the wheels off his chair, then, with a warning to Renee to watch her head, tossed them and his frame in the back. He knew she was staring, but he tried not to let it bother him as he shifted into reverse and pulled out of the lot.

After a few moments of quiet, she spoke again. “You drive with your hands?”

Thank you, Captain Obvious, Kai thought, but he swallowed it down. “Yes. Always have. I don’t trust my legs.”

She apparently wasn’t sure what to say to that, seemingly chastened; despite his best efforts, some of his sardonic thoughts had come through in his tone, so she said nothing.

“Look,” he said when they were parked at a red light, turning to face her, “being forthcoming isn’t exactly my default state, but I’ll do my best to answer your questions. I can’t promise I’ll answer everything, but don’t be afraid to ask whatever you want.” He cringed inwardly at those last words. Even though he’d prefaced it with the assurance he wouldn’t tell her everything, the fact that he was willing to be so open was terrifying. Even Nikki. Even Becca knew only portions of himself. And look where that’d gotten him.

Renee nodded.

He saw fear in her eyes; was she scared of him? Was his calm facade chipping away? He was so tired and sore and fucking pissed at Jon. But at the same time, perhaps this was a second chance of sorts. He’d felt something unlike he’d ever felt before when he’d kissed Renee. It was like his entire body had been sleeping and woke up with that kiss.

“One condition,” he blurted as they neared the apartment.

“What?”

“Please never show up at PT ever again.”

“I’m sor—”

"It's fine. Past is past, etc., etc. Just. Don't do it again." He kept his eyes fixed straight ahead. "I go in the early mornings and late in the evening on purpose. I don't like an audience," he added.

She nodded, ducking her head, and fuck, he felt like such an asshole. He'd tried to be level, not to show his anger, but it apparently didn't matter.

He pulled into his parking spot and set the brake. "It's OK." He reached over and tilted her head up, one long finger on the tip of her chin, wanting, despite everything, to lean over and kiss her again. Instead, he said, "It'll be nice being able to go back to Lost Apple again. I've been avoiding that place for weeks, terrified I'd run into you." He felt his cheeks heating with a blush, and reached up to cover it with his hand.

She hesitated a moment, then pulled his hand away, nesting hers in it. A surprising ache filled his chest, staring at her small fingers curled in his large palm. "So you were avoiding me?"

He swallowed, kept his gaze fixed on their hands so she wouldn't have to see his eyes. "Yes."

"Why?"

He shook his head, then remembered he'd promised to be forthcoming. "The night I was supposed to meet you, to explain all of this . . . I . . ." He cleared his throat, pulled his hand away. Blinked his eyes, then when that wasn't enough, rubbed them with his fingers. "We should go inside."

"Sure," she said in a small voice, clearly disappointed. "Do you—"

"I got it. Just give me a sec." He shut off the car and placed the keys in her hand. "It's chilly, if you want to go ahead and let yourself in."

She stared at the keys for a moment before climbing out.

Jesus fuck. He was going to swear at Jon next chance he got in rapid sign language, even if his brother would only catch a fraction of it. It'd make him feel better.

Renee obeyed Kai, entering the apartment and switching on the light. It was obvious, though he was trying not to show it, how furious he was. And now he'd admitted he'd been avoiding her. God, she was an idiot. What did a guy have to do to make it clear he wasn't interested? . . . But he had invited her here. That meant something, didn't it? And he was trying to moderate his anger, too.

Renee looked around the apartment. It wasn't much different from the one she shared with Diane, though it was shockingly neat. To the right of the entrance was the living area, with the open-plan kitchen and dining nook on the left. A doorway almost directly across from the entrance likely led to the bathroom and bedrooms. The place was . . . it barely looked lived in. Almost like a showcase apartment meant to entice people to rent rather than the home of two young bachelors.

The only signs anyone lived there were a stack of magazines on the table, one held open with a highlighter. No photos decorated the walls; no knickknacks personalized the space. Renee wandered into the kitchen, also noting the apartment didn't seem adapted for someone in a wheelchair. Sure, the doors were a little wider, and the floor was wood laminate instead of carpet, but the kitchen looked like any other kitchen in an apartment like this.

Renee opened the fridge. She knew it was bold, but her maw maw always taught her you can learn a lot about a person based on how they stock their kitchen. She immediately saw the vials labeled *Human Insulin*, remembering vaguely Kai had mentioned his brother was diabetic. What was she doing? Looking for some proof Kai actually lived here instead of this being some kind of setup? She laughed at herself. The fridge was as sparse as the apartment, but the two middle shelves were full of bottles of Gatorade, all stacked on their sides on top of each other, their orange caps showing.

She heard the front door close and the subtle creak of Kai's chair as he rolled in.

"Hand me one?"

Surprised, it took her a moment for his words to register, finally pulling one out and shutting the fridge. "You really love Gatorade," she said, turning around and offering him one. She watched as he twisted the lid and took a long drink. Even tired and sweaty and annoyed and in that chair, he was sexy.

He wiped his mouth with his forearm, then recapped it securely and dropped it in his lap, half empty. "No, actually, I don't really like it at all. But I've been having issues with my blood pressure getting too low, so I'm supposed to drink several bottles a day."

"Oh."

He shrugged. "I'm dying for a shower. There's not much, but help yourself to whatever you want. Coffee's in the cabinet there. Feel free to make a pot." He chuckled at her look of surprise. "I don't drink it, but I'm pretty sure my brother would die if he didn't have coffee daily."

Renee relaxed a bit as Kai did; some coffee sounded nice, though she'd have to double-check the milk.

"There's takeout menus and some cash in this drawer if you want to order something to eat. Get whatever you want; I'm flexible, but vegetarian. Hopefully I'll be done before they get here, but you don't need to wait for me if you're hungry."

She watched him back out, then turn and disappear into the hallway. She opened the drawer, studying the menus, imagining that at any moment, she'd wake up. After weeks of nothing, suddenly she was in Kai's apartment, ready to eat delivery with him and have him actually tell her about himself. It was all too surreal.

Kai reclined in his shower seat, grateful he didn't have just a bench, giving his back a break, letting the hot water fall on him. What was he thinking, inviting Renee here? He was sore everywhere. It would be nice to stay in the shower until the hot water ran out or he felt his blood pressure dropping. But even though he'd warned Renee, it'd be rude to keep her waiting too long.

With a sigh, Kai leaned forward and shut off the water, then wiped off as much of the excess moisture from his skin as he could. Pushing the curtain aside, he transferred carefully into his towel-draped chair, arranging his legs. His right was stiffening, he noted with a grimace. He'd have to stretch before he got dressed and put the brace on. He knew his quads were healing well, all things considered, but he was tired of having to be so fucking careful all the time. Micovic had warned him if he reinjured them, his walking days would be over, no contest. Though he wouldn't be walking much if he didn't regain control of his knee, even just being able to stand again (outside PT) would be nice.

Kai pushed out to his bedroom, grabbing some clothes from a drawer. He'd pulled the tee halfway on out of habit before he realized: if Renee hadn't already seen his trache scar, she would now. His fingers found the indentation at the base of his throat. It'd been a year; maybe it was time he accepted the scars and moved on. He pulled the shirt on the rest of the way, then wheeled to the mirror. This shirt was loose, like most of the ones he slept in, and the collar bunched at the neck, partially masking the scar, especially since the shirt was red.

Fuck it, Kai thought, pushing to his bed and grabbing his automatic blood pressure cuff off one of the shelves of his nightstand. He transferred out of his chair and took his BP.

"Shit," he muttered as soon as the numbers registered. The combination of sweating in PT and the heat of the shower always dropped him a few points, but tonight was bordering on precarious. He felt OK, mostly just tired, but he needed to drink more Gatorade and eat something salty if he didn't want to crash. And with Renee here, that's all he needed.

Renee was unpacking the food from the paper sacks and searching for plates and silverware when Kai rolled out. He was wearing a loose red T-shirt that masked his body except for his arms, and gray cotton pants. On his right knee, over his pants, he wore the black brace she'd

noticed him wear to class. His feet were bare on the footrest, and his hair was damp and uncombed. Her heart stuttered in her chest seeing him like this. It was silly, she knew, but she could get used to him letting his hair down, relaxing around her.

"I got Chinese. I hope that's OK?"

He beamed, pushing toward her eagerly. "That's perfect. My pressure's low; the salt will really help."

Kai grabbed the plates and silverware she'd taken out, and a couple small boxes of what Renee assumed was rice, and stacked them carefully in his lap. Then he pushed to the table, laying it all out. She followed his lead, and soon they were sitting in front of their filled plates, Kai with a second bottle of Gatorade and Renee with her coffee.

Renee offered Kai a pair of chopsticks, and he laughed. "Uh, I think I'd like to get more food in my mouth than not."

"They're easy to use; I can teach you." Unconsciously, Renee eased closer. She demonstrated. "Hold the first one like a pencil." Kai obeyed. "Now, hold the second one just on top, so it pivots." Kai attempted to imitate what Renee was doing, but failed miserably. She laughed good naturedly and took his hand, adjusting the chopsticks. His palm was so much rougher than she'd remembered. She realized it must be from weeks of wheelchair use and using them in PT. It was strangely sensual, and she found her thumb lingering.

Their eyes met; his were heated, but he quickly looked away, abandoning the sticks in favor of his fork. Clearing his throat, he said, "Uh, I'll stick to this for now, thanks."

Renee was so confused. Clearly, he wanted her, but was forcing himself to pull away. *I'm complicated*, he'd told her. That was certainly truth.

They ate in silence for a while, Kai picking at his food. She'd noticed from the few times they'd eaten together how he never seemed to eat with relish; apparently eating was a chore he had to get through, the way some people viewed washing dishes or doing laundry.

"Did I not get the right thing? There weren't that many vegetarian options . . ."

He shook his head, mashing a piece of tofu with his fork. "This is fine." He sighed, and his shoulders sagged. "Look, Re," he said, finally, looking up. "I like you. I do. But . . . I think we should walk before we run." He let out a hollow laugh and stuffed some food in his mouth. "You don't know anything about me," he said after he'd chewed and swallowed.

"That's why I'm here, isn't it?" Renee said, unable to hide the defensive note in her voice.

A shade of a smile pierced his face. "What do you want to know." He didn't say it as a question, just a flat statement, pushing food around his plate, occasionally taking a bite of broccoli or baby corn.

"Tell me about your disease. M—"

"MLS." He inhaled through his nose, his eyes still focused on his plate. Finally, he reached over to the stack of condiment packets and fortune cookies, snagged one, and opened it, pulling out the tiny slip of paper. "Your future is what you make it," he read snidely, before tossing the paper aside and breaking off pieces of the cookie. He leaned back in his wheelchair, occasionally slipping tiny bits of cookie in his mouth and chewing slowly.

Renee watched him, giving him time to formulate his thoughts, trying not to seem impatient. Everything with Kai seemed so . . . calculated. Her fantasy of seeing him relaxed apparently was exactly that. He might be in his PJs, but he wasn't comfortable with her yet. Not by a longshot.

Finally, he lifted his left hand. "Normally, when you want to move your muscles, your brain sends a signal to the nerves there, and those nerves tell the muscle to contract." He formed his fingers into a fist. "Then they cut off the signal, so the muscles can relax again." He released the fist. "The nerves in my muscles are messed up. Often, they'll contract without an outside signal, sometimes rapidly in succession." He opened and closed his fist several times quickly. "Often, the signal to relax gets messed up, so they lock." He stopped, his hand half open, fingers curled, muscles tense; she could see the cords standing out. "They can stay that way for hours,

even days.” He used his other hand to massage it loose. “Sometimes massage is the only way to get them to relax,” he said, flexing his fingers. “The other problem I have,” he said, munching on a few more tiny pieces of cookie, “is the muscles get a kind of ‘boy who cried wolf’ thing after a while.” He nibbled his lip, thinking. “Like, they get oversaturated with stimulation over time so they stop responding. First, it’s a delayed response. So, I’ll want my muscle to move, and it’ll move, but it’ll take it a while before it does.” Kai demonstrated again with his hand. “After a while, it stops responding at all, and the only time I get movement is during a spasm attack.” Kai reached for another cookie, crushing it in the plastic in his fist.

“These . . . attacks. Are they . . . bad?”

Kai had peeled away the plastic and was picking out the tiny shards of cookie with the tip of his finger, slipping them into his mouth, ignoring the fortune. “They can be.”

He abandoned the rest of the cookie dust and forced himself to eat some of his food, adding several packets of soy sauce and mixing it up. She noticed his nose would wrinkle with each bite; clearly, he didn’t actually like it so salty, but apparently was doing so for his blood pressure. She’d heard of people who had problems with high blood pressure, but she’d never seen anyone with low BP issues. Was that part of his disease, too? She wanted to ask, but decided not to for now.

“That Saturday night I was supposed to meet you—”

“And you didn’t show up.”

Kai nodded. “I had a severe MLS attack.” He stabbed his fork repeatedly into a spear of broccoli, his eyes downcast. “I don’t really remember most of it, but . . .” Kai dropped his fork, and his hand went to his neck, cradling it there. It clearly wasn’t easy for him to tell her the truth. Despite his warning: walk not run, she leaned over and laid her hand on his arm. Finally, reluctantly, he met her eyes. “I didn’t meet you that night because . . .” He took in a deep breath. “I was unconscious. I . . . woke up almost three days later, in ICU. Apparently, I nearly died.” He laughed hollowly, then pulled away, focused on gathering up his silverware and trash onto his plate, obviously getting ready to disappear with it into the kitchen.

“Kai, wait,” she said, reaching for him, but he had turned around, so she ended up grabbing the back of his wheelchair instead. She saw his shoulders tense and immediately let go, as if her fingers had been burned. He snapped around in one crisp movement. “*Don’t* touch my chair. And don’t *look* at me like that.” His words were equally sharp.

Renee wasn’t sure how she was looking at him, and wished, desperately, she had his level of control over her facial expressions, that she could conform it into that perfect, unreadable neutral. But she couldn’t, so instead, she forced herself to follow his eyes, taking the plate out of his lap and grabbing his hands, gripping his fingers between hers.

“Kai,” she said. “It’s OK. If you don’t want to tell me any more, you don’t have to. I’ll call a friend or a cab or something.”

She saw some of his anger deflate away, and he squeezed her hands back. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to snap. . . .” His eyes drifted. “I was in the hospital a week, and it was almost two weeks after that before I was remotely myself. And by then . . .” He shrugged, shook his head. “I thought it was too late. It was easier to avoid you than . . .”

“I was convinced you thought the kiss was a mistake. That you had a girlfriend you’d gone back to and you didn’t want anything to do with me.”

Kai’s eyes met hers, shocked and sad, full of disbelief. “How could anyone not want you?” His fingers toyed with the curls on the side of her face. “You’re . . . so beautiful. And sweet. And obviously patient and persistent.” He didn’t laugh, but a faint, genuine smile pierced his stony expression. They started leaning toward each other, but he pushed her back. “You deserve someone far better than me,” he said, grabbing his plate and hurriedly backing away, disappearing into the kitchen.

Renee hesitated a moment, a bit dumbstruck by his admission. Finally, she gathered up her plate and some of the leftovers and followed him. He was cleaning up, obviously desperate to keep busy, his back to her when she entered.

“Shouldn’t I get to decide that?” she asked.

“What?” he asked without turning around, adding detergent to the dishwasher.

“Shouldn’t I get to decide what I deserve?”

He shut the dishwasher to give himself space to turn, which he did, slowly. “Re. Being with me is much more than this,” he said, his fingers playing along his pushrims. “Much more.”

“Then give me a chance to find out. Don’t I deserve that?”

He smiled faintly, and after a moment’s hesitation, studying her face, offered her his hand. She took it, smiling back, surprised when he pulled her into his lap, perching her on his left thigh. “I never thought I’d get to do this again,” he said finally, his eyes half lidded as he pulled her in for a kiss.

Renee had dreamed of this moment, and though she never pictured it exactly like this, sitting on his lap in a wheelchair in his kitchen, both their tongues tasting of soy sauce and ginger, it was even better than she’d imagined. This kiss made the first pale by comparison. She felt light, feathery, like she was floating, yet his arms wrapped tightly around her to keep her from sliding off his lap. His mouth was warm and salty and wonderful, his kiss demanding and yearning and so *honest*. Kai’s kiss said more clearly than any words could: he *wanted* her. He’d been wanting her since that first day, just as she’d wanted him, and he’d obviously been holding himself back for reasons she still didn’t fully understand. But now, as his tongue danced beside hers, as he nibbled her lips and teased her, she could feel his smile, his genuine, happy, no-pretense, no-masks smile, and it made her laugh despite herself. He echoed her, pulling back just long enough to get a breath before diving in again for more. Her skin tingled, her hands tracing over his shoulders, biceps, and she pulled away, kissing trails along his chin, jaw, down his neck. She loved the way he smelled: strongly of soap and water, underlying a subtle male scent she knew was him. No fancy body sprays or aftershaves or colognes. Just him.

As she worked her kisses down his neck, she felt him stiffen and push her away. What had she done wrong now?

Securing her with one hand, she noticed he pulled up his shirt collar with the other. His eyes were still dark, his lips swollen, his cheeks flushed. He blinked a few times, and now his eyes just looked sad. So achingly, penetratingly melancholy, she wondered how he could switch so rapidly from anger to happiness to despair in only a matter of moments.

He nudged her off his lap, then looked around the kitchen, seemingly lost for what to do next. Finally, he spied the cartons of food, so he busied himself shutting them and sticking them in the fridge.

“I should take you home.”

“No.”

“No?”

“Let’s go sit. You promised me twenty questions, and I’ve only gotten a couple.”

Kai sighed, but he followed her out to the living room. He grabbed a pillow that was set off to the side, placing it in his lap. Then he pushed to the sofa, laying it out of the way but within reach. Part of her figured she should look away when he transferred, but she loved watching him, loved the way the fabric of his T-shirt clung to his shoulders as they flexed with his movements. He placed one palm on the sofa cushion, his other on the edge of his wheelchair's seat, heaving himself up and over. It was jarring, despite all she'd witnessed already this evening, to see his legs left behind, visibly stiff, his toes tense. How he had to use his hands to pull them onto the couch, one by one, taking special care with his right leg, that knee fixed by the brace at an angle slightly greater than 90 degrees. Kai took some extra time arranging the pillow beneath his legs. Renee noted his right toes flexed and relaxed in a strange rhythm, so Kai

leaned forward to wrap a hand around them, his fingers working, as if to still them. Evidently, a small sample of the spasms he'd spoken of earlier.

"Does it hurt?"

"What?"

She slid into the opposite end of the couch, curling her legs beneath her. "When your muscles do that." She gestured with her chin.

He released his foot, and she could see his toes had stopped spasming, though they looked tense. He sighed, leaned back against the arm of the couch, eyes narrowed. Calculating. "Yes," he said, at last. "But I'm used to it." He finally fixed his eyes on hers, unreadable, as he quoted, "Life is pain. Anyone who says otherwise is selling something." Then he blinked, and before he looked away again, she saw that chilling, penetrating sadness.

"What happened to you?" she asked softly, not even sure she'd spoken the words out loud until his head snapped up. "Why won't you trust me? I don't care about the wheelchair, if that's what you're worried about."

He shook his head. "It's not that. I mean, yeah, I guess that's part of it. I might not realistically walk again. Do you understand that?"

Renee blinked at him, glanced over at his empty wheelchair, then back at him. What was there to understand? "That doesn't matter to me. Why should it matter?"

Kai was silent a long time. Finally, he spoke, slowly, carefully, "Today's about honesty, right? Tell me. What were the first thoughts that went through your head when you saw me? In PT."

Renee tilted her head, thinking. "Uh . . . surprise. I was surprised. Uh, and then I was worried. I thought I should have waited for you outside. Like I was invading your privacy. That you were going to be mad at me."

"That's it?" His tone was caustic, disbelieving. Not quite angry, but bordering on it.

"Uh . . ." Renee felt her cheeks heat. "Honestly, seeing you like that . . . finally realizing at least part of the truth, that you'd been keeping from me? It was like I was seeing *you* for the first time. And I realized . . . that I wanted to know you more than ever." Renee risked a glance up, but Kai's face was unreadable except for his eyes, which had darkened to a deep, cold blue.

"Really. You're not just saying that because you think that's what I want to hear?"

"Jesus, Kai," Renee said, finally breaking down. "I don't know *what* you want to hear." Renee sighed. "I don't understand you. It doesn't mean I don't want you." Renee pushed some hair out of her face, staring at Kai straight on. She was going to give him honesty, and if he asked her to leave, then so be it. "The reason I showed up today is because I was tired of not seeing you. Because all this time we've been apart, all I've been able to think about is you. And when we're together, all I can think about is kissing you. I've only kissed you twice, and this last kiss was even better than the first. And the first was incredible." Renee felt tears welling up and swallowed against them. "And right now? All I want is a chance to kiss you again. And find out if the third kiss is better than the fourth. And the fourth better than the fifth. And if the fifth is better . . . than all of them. I just want you to give me a chance. To find out."

Renee realized she was breathing hard, not quite crying, but close. Kai's face was unreadable, but his brow was furrowed, and the darkness in his eyes had dissipated. Finally, he met her gaze.

"Is that really how you feel?" he asked, his voice small, uncertain.

"Yes," Renee said with conviction.

Kai shifted, lifting his legs off the couch so he was now sitting properly, his hands braced on either side of his thighs, the pillow moved aside. "I'm messed up," he said. "More than just my legs."

Renee took that as an invitation to scoot closer. An indescribable warm, happy feeling forming in her chest when he embraced her with one arm, hugging her close to his body. She

laid her head on his chest, feeling so strangely complete somehow. True, she barely knew him. But still, this felt so right.

“Then we’ll be messed up together.”

Renee looked up in time to catch Kai’s smile, one she couldn’t remember seeing before, yet another of his multitude different grins she had yet to learn. With one hand, he cupped her cheek, pulling her toward him. His lips met hers, almost tentatively at first, before he deepened the kiss. Even more than the one in the kitchen, this kiss was filled with a desperate longing, the tender way his tongue and lips moved against hers, the way his hand still held her face as if she were something precious he was afraid to lose if he bothered to let go for even a moment. This kiss spoke even louder than the last: *I want you. I’ve missed you.* And, she realized, by the way he clung to her as their tongues moved together, *Don’t leave me.* Maybe even, if the fire she felt blooming in her heart from his taste and touch were any indication, the sparks that, with time, would ignite into *I love you.*

Renee had never kissed anyone like this, where it wasn’t simply a prelude to sex, where it was so much, so very much, more than that. Where she was left with her insides floating around, her heart stuttering, dizzy. Confused, unsure, yet, bewilderingly, knowing happiness was right here, tall and blond and mysterious, and who kissed her as if he fueled her very soul.

Finally, he pulled back, his nose brushing against hers, reluctant to part. He smiled, but his eyes still held that chilling sadness, as if he were certain, when he blinked, he’d realize this was all a dream. Renee knew that feeling, because part of her was afraid of the same thing. His fingers toyed with her hair, wrapping a ringlet repeatedly around one finger. The more he did the motion, fingertips grazing her cheek, the more the sadness shifted to a softness she couldn’t quite identify, but her heart told her was *right*. It was exactly how she was looking at him, knowing—not even sure how—that he was her future: wheelchair, baggage, and one million smiles.

“Was that better?”

It was her turn to smile, besotted, her hand searching out one of his strong shoulders. “I’m not sure,” she responded coyly. Then she leaned forward, stealing another kiss. And she’d been right. Every kiss was better than the last.

End Season One.

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 (FEV_1), 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_{O_2}) not normally seen in traditional asthma; in fact, it is not uncommon for FS patients to have abnormally low ($>90\%$) Sa_{O_2} 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, Amphigarol, 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 tetanic. 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.**

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/>

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)

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.

You can follow her on Twitter [@ChieAleman](https://twitter.com/ChieAleman) or check out her blog, <http://chiealeman.com>