

**Chocolate  
Chip Cookies  
And Pink  
Nails**

## **Summary**

From a greasy food fight to quite literally dancing the night away. To fighting her fears and singing in public to jumping out of an airplane. M is on a crazy adventure. Desperate to escape only for one week and live a little. To escape the hopelessly sad loophole that is unrequited love. With only six months left of high school, M has a choice to make. Run off into the distance and travel the world. Jump into high education uncertain of what she wants to study. Or continue to pine over her best friend, Sasha. But as Zack cleverly stated: "Not knowing what the future holds makes living fun." So here are too random and crazy adventures and of course who can forget the chocolate chip cookies and pink nails?

## **Author Note**

This is the first ever version of this story. It's completely raw and unedited. There are plot holes, grammar mistakes and overall moments that makes no sense to anyone but me. It's messy. I fully intend to turn this first draft into something so much bigger but that's going to take some time. Please note that I'm constantly evolving with my writing. I wrote this book a few months ago and I already think it's incredibly badly written. Even though I want to stick my head into a little hole and hide from the world at the very thought of people reading this: I'm still so proud of this. I love this story so much. It helped me when I was going through a hard time and for that I'm grateful. You're more than welcome to read this story and share constructive criticism on it. What do you think is missing? What should I add? What grammar mistake is repeated? Though, threw, thought and etc. I won't ever know I misuse these words until someone points it out to me. While that being said, I repeat this book is the **FIRST DRAFT**. It's very raw and there **WILL** be grammar mistakes. If you want to point out every single spelling mistake, go right ahead. Just know, I won't necessarily respond to it. I'm going to start the heavy editing process in August 2019 so hopefully, you will have the final version of this book early 2020. We will have to see how things play out. Thank you so much for the support and I hope you will enjoy this story.

PS This is a coming of age story so it's a story designed for young adults. I touch on serious subjects in this book.

## *Chapter One: The True Meaning Of Love*

What does love mean to you? Miss Howard held great pride in the fact that her English essays always had topics that forced you to hunker down and think a little. Sometimes the subjects were serious and other times they were more lighthearted but they always required you to really think. You couldn't just throw something out there for the sake of reaching the required word count. Oh no, she would have you rewrite the entire essay after school. The women had high standards of what she expected from you. This week, the topic made the girls in the class buzz in excitement. With Valentine's day on Thursday, they gushed about chocolates and roses. What does love mean to you? Love has always been an interesting topic for my family. I have two fathers. Before meeting each other, the two deemed themselves to be straight. They loved to please women. Real players of the field. Daddy Dearest always told me of the pain and agony they experienced as they fought the bond. The heartbreak. And then once they accepted each other and their love, the true happiness, and bliss that followed made all the struggles worth it. Years passed of marital bliss before they adopted me. A rejected baby left in a ditch. Love comes in all shapes and sizes. They would say. Although we didn't share blood, I was their child. What does love mean to you? I bit my pen as I pondered over the question. Where do I even start? Time inched by slowly and unable to find the answer, I rolled over to my side to read my messages. The constant beeping peaked my attention. The sender could only be one person. Sasha. My best friend since kindergarten.

<OMG! You won't believe what just happened!>  
<I want to die from the embarrassment.>  
<Please come over and kill me.>  
<Zack caught us getting down and dirty.>  
<I'm dead serious. He full on walked in on us.>  
<John was inside of me, M.>  
<I repeat. INSIDE OF ME.>  
<Instead of pulling out. He came right there and then.>  
<I'm not even kidding. He came inside of me.>  
<I'm freaking out.>  
<Zack is so going to tell Dad.>  
<I'm dead meat.>  
<Please come over.>  
<I need damage control.>  
<Zack nearly killed John.>  
<OMG. My brother saw my vagina.>  
<Just kill me.>  
<Hello? Where are you?>  
<PLEASE M.>  
<I NEED YOU RIGHT NOW.>  
<I SWEAR I'M GOING TO SPAM YOU TILL YOU COME OVER.>

<M.>

<M.>

<M.>

Sasha stood true to her response with over a hundred messages of just M. My mind reeled at the new information and a piece of my heart clenched. Even though I've come to terms that Sasha's relationship with John is here to stay...it still hurt to hear about their sex life. I quickly typed a short response before getting up. I skipped down the stairs before coming to a halt at Dad's office door. I knocked and after a few seconds of silence, I opened the door. I peaked my head through and found my Dad nearly buried in paperwork. He glanced up and smiled.

"Heading over to Sasha. I will probably eat dinner at their place." Before dad could reply, his phone rang.

"Okay sweetheart. You know the drill. Be home before ten!" I nodded in response. Dad answered the call. I mouthed a quick goodbye before closing the door behind me. Next stop. The kitchen. As predicted, I found Daddy Dearest rolling out the dough.

"What are you making?" I leaned over to peck his cheek before grabbing an apple from the fruit bowl.

"I'm playing around with this new cookie recipe. I want to make a cookie muffin." I knew better to question what a cookie-muffin exactly is and instead moved to the fridge to grab a bottle of water.

"I'm just quickly heading over to Sasha's place. It's a John emergency. I'm probably going to stay over for dinner." Daddy Dearest paused at the mention of John, his features immediately becoming concerned. I shook my head and bit back the tears.

"We can talk about it tonight but I should really leave." After a while, Daddy Dearest nodded before returning his attention to the dough. I pecked his cheek again before bouncing out of the kitchen. My phone buzzed with another message. Sasha wasn't known for her patience. I quickly pulled on my shoes and jacket before grabbing my keys and rushing outside. My phone buzzed once more as another ten messages flashed on the screen. Sasha also had the horrible habit of sending sixty short messages in one go. Why she couldn't just write one long message was beyond me. After sending her a bicycle emoticon which meant I was on my way, I tucked my phone in my jacket pocket before mounting my bicycle. The cold wind bit my face. The things you do for love.

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"You're late!" Sasha squeaked before my bicycle even touched her driveway. I glanced at her wild appearance and sighed. Sasha couldn't handle stressful situations. Exam periods was chaos with her around.

"Relax! Have you talked to Zack? He won't just snitch on you." She shook her head no, her hair flying wildly around her shoulder.

"Why don't you go fix your I-just-had-sex hair look and I will go talk to your brother." She nodded before disappearing into the house. I quickly locked the bicycle before following her inside. I took the stairs two at a time, walking directly to Zack's room. He opened at the third knock and I chuckled at his appearance. Where his sister looked frantic with stress and panic. Zack looked sick to his stomach. Seeing his little sister having sex with her boyfriend clearly did a number on him.

"Don't laugh at me. I'm going to have nightmares for the rest of my life." Zack collapsed on his bed and groaned. I laughed before following his cue and collapsing on his king size bed. I poked his sides still laughing.

"Does he really have the weird birthmark on his butt?" I burst out laughing at the pure look of disgust on Zack's face.

"Please just stop." Zack rubbed at his eyes, probably trying his utmost best to rub the memory away. I rolled my eyes and laughed. After a few minutes, Zack joined.

"Sasha is worried you're going to spill the beans to the parentals," I said after a few moments of silence. Zack sighed before rolling over onto his back.

"I won't tell." I smiled at his response. Sasha will be relieved. I moved to get up to share the news but Zack tugged on my hand, halting my departure.

"Are you okay?" Like Daddy Dearest, he was concerned. I nodded slowly.

"I've come to terms with it..." I simply stated before pulling my hand from his grasp. I practically ran to Sasha's room before Zack could press on the matter.

The rest of the evening was a breeze. Sasha relaxed completely once I reassured her that her brother had no plans to tell their parents about the incident. She immediately called John to inform him of the news and chatted away with him about the weekend plans to celebrate Valentine's Day. I grabbed my book from her desk before settling down on her bed and continuing the story I started days prior. I bid goodbye to the Wilson family after dinner before cycling home. Once home, my phone buzzed with a message. <It's going to be okay.> I smiled at Zack's message. Only three people knew about my unrequited love. My fathers and Zack. I walked straight to my bedroom before dropping onto my bed. My unfinished essay crinkled at my weight. What does love mean to you? Heartbreak. Absolute heartbreak. I, after all, fell in love with my best friend.

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I returned my attention to my essay. What does love mean to you? With an answer in mind, I got to work.

### *The True Meaning of Love*

*Let's separate the words unconditional love and look at them individually. First, what do we mean by the word love? Many of us have thought we understood the*

*meaning of unconditional love, yet perhaps we should again consider what it really means. Is unconditional love a feeling, something like affection or romance? Is it sexual desire? Is it an expression towards another? What does it mean to unconditionally love another? What does it mean to unconditionally love ourselves? Often we define love as a physical response to either external or internal stimuli. For instance, when we look at another person whom we love, we may get a sense of inner happiness that translates into a melting feeling in our bodies. Love can also be defined in a more superficial way, with a descriptive meaning. We may use the word casually as an expression, without feeling or truly understanding its essence. Let's look now at love as being something more than just an internal feeling or external description.*

*Love, like all our other doorway concepts, it a thought within. The thought of love has an energy to it. The energy comes from the culmination of all our experience and memories of love. The physical and emotional experiences provide part of the backdrop of what we know as love. And yet there is more. Because love is thought and our thoughts have energy, love is also power: internal power. Love is a sense of peace within. Love is joy and happiness deep inside. Love is an expression of kindness and compassion. Love understands. Love comforts, supports and cares for. Love forgives. Love also honors, respects and believes. Love is patient. Love does not judge or show hate. Love does not fear or doubt. Love trusts. Love is not aggression, spire or terror. Love is not blame or guilt. Love I so much more than just a word. It is a way of being – it is a thought. To be unconditional is to have no strings attached, no expectation, no stipulations. If we bring our two words together, we may say that unconditional love is an unlimited way of being. We are without a limit in our thinking and our expression of thought. If we can imagine it, we can build it. Life through love, is, therefore, an unlimited experience. This is the true meaning of love.*

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A/N - The brilliant piece in italics is a piece written by Harold W. Becker. In this chapter, it is, however, the main character's English essay.

## *Chapter Two: Future Dreams*

At first, I fought the love. How could I have romantic feelings for my very straight best friend? It's wasn't the fact that I loved someone from the same gender, it was a matter of loving someone knowing full well they would never return the feelings. The heartbreak that follows this type of love. Every part of my being knew that I have to move on. I have to accept that no matter how close we are, our love will never be romantic. I will always be her best friend. Years have passed with continuous heartbreak and empty hopes but my unrequited love stayed strong. Maybe the distance is the answer? Maybe the reason why I haven't been able to get over this love is that I see her every day? The very thought of losing the friendship made my stomach clench. As many nights before, I pondered over this till I fell asleep.

"Have you thought about what you want to do next year?" Dad asked at our usual family Sunday brunch. I bit my lip. Dad was a planner. He was the most organized person in our family of three. He was all about his routines and rules. Daddy dearest was his opposite. A dreamer. Never a true plan. Just riding the wave as he would say. Go with the flow. I was somewhere in the middle. I liked having a rough plan to follow and goals to work towards but if life rocked the boat and steered me into another direction; I wouldn't fight it.

"I can't decide what I want to study. I don't want to jump into a study because I think I might like the career and change my mind a few months in. It's a waste of money." Dad hummed in response and took another bite of the quiche.

"Why don't you just go out and travel?" It was my turn to hum as I thought about Daddy Dearest question. I wasn't a massive traveler. Didn't hold the need to constantly explore and go on these adventures.

"I don't know. I don't want to waste money and just wander around without a purpose." Dad sighed. I hated wasting money. Both of my dads' worked hard for their money. It would be wrong of me to spend their money recklessly

"We've been over this cupcake. We want to support you and your future." It was my turn to sigh.

"I know. I know. But the thing is I have no idea what I want to do." Do I want to study? Do I want to travel? Do I want to leave Sasha? Panic bubbled inside my chest, inching up towards my throat before spilling out of my mouth. I sobbed. I'm only eighteen. How am I supposed to know now what I want to do for the rest of my life?

"There is no rush but cupcake you're graduating in six months. You should at least think about this." Dad added before dropping the subject. Daddy Dearest simply gave me a reassuring pat on the back before raving about his cookie muffin. Apparently, he is so close to perfecting the recipe and then we can try it. He reassured that he is currently looking at the next big thing that's going to blow up in his bakeries. I took his word for it. The man knew what he was talking about.

After brunch, I decided that instead of locking myself up in my room and feeling sorry for myself, my time would be better spent outside. Some fresh air would probably do me some good. As I cycled to the park, my thoughts wandered once more to the conversation hour prior. What am I going to do after I graduate? Better yet what am I going to do about Sasha? It's been five years by now. It quite breathtakingly clear that she isn't suddenly going to confess her feelings and we will live happily ever after. Sasha and John have been dating for over a year now and I can see them going for the big one. Married. Cute little house. Seventeen children. Sasha always made it clear that she would marry and make tons of babies. There was no higher education in her sights. She wanted to be a housewife and kids and whatnot. John might just be the one she has that with. I sighed. My thoughts always went back to Sasha. I planned my entire life around her. Do I move away and go to college and allow the friendship to die off naturally? Sasha hasn't exactly been super present in our friendship since her relationship with John kicked off. We didn't really hang out as we used to but she is still my best friend. Right? My mind reeled, going from one thought to another. College. Travels. Sasha. College. Travels. Sasha. And cookies. Daddy Dearest planted the seed and now I'm craving cookies. Chocolate chip cookies to be precise. College. Travels. Sasha.

I simply just laid on the grass at the park, the background noises fading away. I stared at the leaves of the tree and just allowed my mind to wonder. Again the same things floated through my head. College. Travels. Sasha. How do you know what the right decision is? What if I go off to college and I fail because I have no idea what I want to study? Do I even want to study? Do I even want to travel and explore? How am I supposed to know what I want to do with my life now? Will distance from Sasha really help me? I know only one thing for sure. My unrequited love needs to end. The heartbreak has been unending and there is only so much one human can take. I need to move on and go on with life. I can't be stuck in the same sad loophole forever. I need to take the plunge and move forward. I need to do something big. <Want to do something crazy?> Zack reply was instant. His caller ID flashed on my screen and I smiled before pressing the green phone.

"I want to do something crazy. Do you want to go somewhere with me? For the week?" Don't think about it. Just do. Thinking is getting me nowhere. I clearly have no idea what I want to do with my life but staying locked away stuck in my own confusing thoughts is clearly not going to get me anywhere.

"What about school?" Zack asked after a few moments of silence. The nerd always worried about the little things.

"One week from school won't kill me. Besides I'm ahead with most of my subjects anyway." I paused and bit my lip suddenly feeling unsure about my decision. Do I really want to go away for a week? Where would we even go? How is this going to help me decide what I want to do after high school?

"I just need to get away from it all you know? I'm stuck in this sad little loophole and I'm drowning." I added, my voice hitched as tears rolled down my cheeks. It was true.

"Alright let's do it. Where do you want to go?" Good question.

"Let's throw a dart on the map and go wherever it lands." I bit my lip as the excitement grew for my new adventure. Maybe I should travel after high school...

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"What do you mean you're going to New York for a week with my brother? Are you insane? Honestly what has been going on with you these last few days? You're acting so self-involved! I need you right now and you're just abandoning me? Fine do whatever the hell you want! You clearly only care about yourself! Don't bother crawling back to me after this stupid adventure of yours. I'm so done. It's always just about you and I'm just so sick of it." The phone beeped as she hung up and I sat there stunned. What just happened? Sasha's response to my text message was unexpected, to say the least. I bit back tears. Is this how she really feels? Am I truly that much of a horrible friend? Maybe I should stay? I can still make everything right if I go over now... No. I need to do this. I need to do something for myself. Go out there and experience something different. I need to escape this loophole. I need to pull myself out of this water before I drown for real.

<What time are we leaving tomorrow?>

<The flight is at 8 am. I will pick you up at 5 am. Pack light.>

Once the dart landed on New York, Zack took over with the promise to plan everything. Like, Dad, he was a planner. I fell back onto my bed and stared at my ceiling. I can't believe I'm actually going through with this. I'm skipping school for the first time of my life and going on a crazy adventure with my best friend's brother. Although these last few months he has been a better friend than the said best friend. I sighed as my thoughts returned to Sasha's phone call. Did she really mean everything she said? Am I self-involved? I don't think so but maybe that just proves her point? I glanced at my clock. 6 hours before we leave. Sleep would probably be a good idea right about now...Instead, my mind reeled about what our crazy one week adventure would be. Zack promised that he had the entire thing planned out. Apparently, he has a few things on his bucket list he wants to cross out and he wants to pull me along for a ride.

## *Chapter Three: Greasy Sheets*

"Remember I want a text every day. I need to know that you're alive okay." Daddy Dearest fussed before pulling me in for his famous bear hug.

"I still don't understand why you want to turn your phone off. What if there is an accident?" Dad question, concern etched into his tired face. Daddy Dearest pulled him into our now family bear hug.

"Don't worry sir. My phone will be on at all times. I will personally call you every night at 7 pm with an update. I will take good care of your daughter. I promise." Zack promised as he stood at the open door. We were running late but my dotting fathers struggled to let me go.

"Take care of her okay." Daddy Dearest whispered before finally releasing me and giving me a light peck on the forehead.

"Okay go before I change my mind!" Dad huffed before abruptly turning around, mumbling to himself as he disappeared into the kitchen.

"I love you too!" I called after him with a chuckle.

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"Come on Zack! At least give me a hint!" I huffed and crossed my arms over my chest. Zack refused as to so much peep about what we're going to do once we arrive in New York. No hints whatsoever.

"Come on M. Not knowing what the future holds makes living fun." I paused at his words. Is he right? Is truly not knowing what your future has in store a good thing? How does this make living life fun? I pondered over his words the entire flight. Constantly over thinking is truly exhausting. I've been indecisive my entire life. The idea of not knowing what my life will be like in only a short six months scares me endlessly. A routine is safe. My weekdays are painstakingly similar. My morning starts early with a quick 30-minute high-intensity workout supplied via YouTube. After my shower, I pull on the usual outfit: Jeans and a graphic T-shirt. Once dressed I will have breakfast with my fathers' while Daddy Dearest styles my hair. After breakfast, I pull on my jacket and shoes before racing to school on my bicycle. At school, I meet up with Sasha and get a rundown of whatever is happening in her life and how John is doing. I know more personal details about John that I care to remember. No one but his girlfriend and mom should know what face he makes when he poops. Sasha didn't spare any details and I haven't been able to look at John the same ever since. We separate once the bell rings and my classes start. Then it's simply just making small talk to my classmates here and there before meeting up with Sasha for lunch which is mainly the time, she sucks face with John. After fighting the urge to vomit and cry, I finish my lunch before bidding her goodbye and making a beeline for the library. There I will return my books and loan new ones before joining my game friends in the computer lounge. We talk shop till the bell rings and I return to my classes.

In the short second break I don't even bother to meet up with Sasha and instead do some homework. After school, it's back home to do whatever the hell I want. Watch series or read mainly. Occasionally I would hang out with Sasha like the good old days but there is only so much John stories a girl can take. This would repeat five days a week. The most exciting thing would be an occasional trip to the shopping center where I would stuff my face with McDonald's and explore the bookstore and gaming center. Weekends was constant as well. Saturday is spend the day at Sasha's or chill at the house. Sundays are a family day and whatever else you still need to do for the school. Nothing exciting ever really happened. I kept to my set routine like clockwork and although exciting opportunities would arrive; my fathers' European cruise, rock legend ACDC in town, comic con, festivals and etc. Stepping outside my safe little bubble terrified me enough to stop me from every straying. Hence why this crazy adventure is long overdue. Who knows maybe I will hate every second. At least I tried something new. At least I left my safe routine and experience an adventure. At least I took one step forward to change.

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"I would like to order 300 large chips and 300 of your largest containers of chicken nuggets," Zack ordered as casual as can be. His tone so monotone you would think the crazy boy just asked directions, but oh no. Instead, he asked for the impossible. The lady blinked, mirroring my confused expression.

"Sir, did you mean **THREE** large chips and **THREE** nine chicken nuggets?" I nodded my head. Of course, that's what he meant. What else could he possibly mean?

"I meant as in 300 large chips and 300 nine chicken nuggets," Zack repeated himself and added a nice little eye role in my direction. It's official. He was dropped on his head as a baby and has gone insane. Just my luck I go to a strange town with a complete loon. Is he going to sell my organs on the black market? Turn my insides into chicken nuggets?

"Uhhmm sir we can't sell that amount to just one person..." The lady trailed off.

"Why not? Can I speak to your manager?" The young girl nodded unsure about what the hell she is supposed to do right about now. I mean same, girl. Same. At least after your done with this order you won't have to see this loon again. I'm stuck with him for a week. I repeat. A week. The manager arrived and after having a brief conversation with Zack turned to the girl and gave her the go-ahead to put in the order. An hour later we walked out of McDonald's with enough junk food to kill ten adults.

"So what exactly are we going to do with all of this food? Hand it out to homeless people like those narcissistic YouTubers' do when their views are low?" Zack simply shook his head before hailing a cab.

"My dear sweet little innocent friend. We're about to have a food fight in our pretty hotel room." Zack tut like his answer should've been obvious. I was right. He is batshit crazy. Instead of slowing turning around and making a run for it, I followed him into the taxi.

"Prepare to lose." I chuckled in my best evil villain chuckle before grabbing a mouthful of chips. Victory will taste oh so sweet. And oily. So much grease.

If the hotel staff was concerned about our large quantity of McDonald bags, they didn't show it as they guided us to our room. Zack clearly has whipped out his daddy's credit card with a very nice, almost too white, room with a view. Once in the room, he turned to the TV and played around until he found what he was looking for. An epic dance soundtrack. I raised my eyebrow.

"So Zack..." I paused when a wicked grin crossed his features. Before I could respond and move, a flock of fries hit me square in the face. The cold fries, soggy by now slowly dropped from my body and onto the white carpet. I blinked. What. Just. Happened? Instead of allowing my brain to just comprehend that Zack threw fries in my face, he picked up a box of chicken nuggets, took one and aimed. It hit me square in the boob.

"Oh, it's on!" With a war cry, I grabbed as many McDonald's bags as I could and ducked for cover behind the chair. I immediately launched my own greasy attack, throwing a continues handful of fries as Zack squealed and ran to escape my soggy bullets.

"Die! Die! Die!" I cackled as Zack squealed in pain as a large chicken nugget hit him straight in the nose. Zack, however, refuses to stand down. With his own battle cry, he gathered a handful of chicken nuggets, jumped on top of the bed and launched the greasy rocks to my head. I screamed, scrambled from behind the chair and ran to the bathroom. The greasy floor, however, had other plans. I gracefully tumbled to the floor, sliding a few meters. Zack stopped his attack abruptly.

"Are you okay? Did you hurt yourself?" I viciously took his moment of weakness to attack with everything I got. Chicken nuggets flew through the air, hitting him all over his body. He dropped to the bed in one big thump, groaning in pain after the largest chicken nugget I could find hit him square in the balls. It was my turn to pause as I walked to my friend in concern. Zack turned the tables and pulled me into his greasy grasp and attacked my sides with his fingers. I squealed and wiggled but Zack simply cackled at my agony.

"Stop! Please just stop!" After another few minutes of ticklish torture, he let me go. I collapsed next to him on the bed, gasping for air. I turned to face my friend and laughed. Laughed so hard tears ran down my cheeks and snot flew out of my nose. Zack joined in.

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"I feel so gross." I rolled onto my side. Once our laughter died down, Zack and I slipped into a peaceful nap covered in greasy sheets. The smell alone pulled me from my slumber. Soggy and greasy food stuck to everything.

"Let's go shower." Zack rolled over to his side, pulling me into his arms.

"In a minute." He mumbled sleepily. I laughed before pushing his arms off me and getting up from the bed. I pulled a face as I took in the no longer pretty and white hotel room.

"The cleaning crew is going to hate us so much." Zack simply laughed before slowly getting up.

"Wait. Where are you going?" Zack paused as he stopped in front of the bathroom door.

"Shower?" It was his turn to give me the are-you-nuts look.

"I called it first!" I huffed before sprinting to the bathroom door. Zack simply stood strong and blocked my path.

"We can always shower together." Zack wiggled his eyebrows and added with a wink.

"You know to save some water." I rolled my eyes and shoved him out of the way.

"No way in hell buddy. You're not my type..." Both of us paused at my words.

"Does this mean you only like girls?" Zack asked after a few moments of silence. I bit my lip. I never really thought about it. Love is love. It's not only stuck to one gender. If I ever do move on from Sasha...I guess would I start to look romantically at other girls. Or will the next person I fall in love with be a guy?

"Nah, I think both fields are fine." I finally replied before closing the bathroom door. Glancing at myself in the mirror, I pulled a face and laughed. Oh, a shower is definitely needed. I look so gross.

## ***Chapter Four: Black Eyeliner***

"Remind me again why this idea is so great?" Zack rolled his eyes at my lingering question. The man did not joke around when he said that he planned to do something crazy every day while we're in New York.

"It's something different. Now stop complaining and try not the purple wig!" Zack huffed before turning his attention to the nearby shelves. Zack had the brilliant idea that we should sneak into a Pastel Goth club and just well need new people. Both of our usual clothes were deemed averagely casual at best. Jeans and T-shirts are life.

"Nothing fun ever happens inside your comfort zone M. You wanted a crazy adventure and I'm going to give it to you. Come on I saw this in a movie once and this is going to be so much fun!" I sighed before finally nodding in agreement. The boy has a point. I turn and start to pull the long girly pastel purple wig over my head. The shop assistant quickly rushed over when she saw my wonderfully but very much so failed attempt at applying a wig. Zack pulled out a two piece skirt with a little crop top shirt and wiggled his eyebrows.

"Now this is so you!" I glanced at the blue dress and reluctantly agreed with Zack. Although it was drastically different from my Iron Man T-shirt, it was in my range of stuff I like. The pastel blue dress was covered in a purple and pink rainbow, bats, hearts, stars, and moons. Perfectly cute.

"Why don't you come over and try on your wig as well?" The wig in question was in pastel blue with a pink strip at the front. Short but wavy. Similar to the fresh baby-faced Justin Bieber. While the shop assistant helped Zack into his wig, I browsed the aisles for his outfit. My eyes landed on a pastel yellow hoodie with a blue horizontal stripe through the chest. It was littered with little stars and would match my dress perfectly. I finished the outfit with light washed blue jeans overall that was cut of mid-thigh. It would look great with the black stocking. Armed with the knowledge to apply a wig correctly we got everything else we needed. Gothic stockings, big bulky boots and a lot of accessories. Chains, chokes, clip op earrings, bulky skull rings, and enough arm bracelets to reach our elbows. Next stop was Sephora for makeup.

"How hard could applying makeup be? I will watch a tutorial when we're back at the hotel." Zack chuckled, doubting my makeup skills before I could even touch a makeup product. His laughter only grew louder when I asked the shop assistant what contour was. The girl, however, was a champ and once she learned that we would be doing a Gothic look, steered us towards black lipstick, eyeshadows, eyeliner. She then continued to walk me through the process and ended the little walk through with a pale foundation. She made me promise that I would blend down our necks.

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"Zack! Have you seen the butt plug sponge? This lady on YouTube says it's essential for an even application!" Zack mumbled before stuffing another chocolate chip cookie into his mouth. His attention solely focused on the latest episode of Keeping Up With The Kardashians.

"I'm judging you so hard right now." I sneered and Zack responded as any young adult would. He threw a cookie.

"Shut up! Like you don't think Kylie Jenner is hot as fu.ck!" I rolled my eyes and returned my attention to my laptop screen. The girl was now explaining contour and how we should use a grey tone over the really pale foundation to give the whole Gothic look.

"If this makeup look turns into a black smudge, just go with it okay," I said before getting up and moving to the bathroom. Time to start applying the makeup. How hard could it be? I mean I can kind of draw and paint so I shouldn't suck too much of it.

"Here is the butt plug!" Zack screamed and threw the blending sponge at the bathroom door.

"Thanks! Order some room service. I'm starving." Zack hummed and continued to stuff his face with cookies. I followed the instructions step by step, taking my time in the application. It took a while and a few failed attempts that a makeup remover wipe had to fix but a full two hours later, I stepped out into the hotel room. Zack's mouth dropped open at my appearance and whistled.

"Now that is a Goth Up!" He paused. "Do you get it? Glow-Up. Goth Up." Zack trailed off when I didn't erupt in endless laughter at his joke. I quickly dug into my meal, being aware not to smudge my makeup.

"Alright now it's your turn!" Zack groaned in response but moved to face me regardless.

"I'm going to give you the Goth Up of the mother fucking century." Zack shot me a glare which only caused more loud laughter to stream from my mouth.

"Did you call my dad's yet?" I asked as I applied the foundation. Can't forget the ears and neck. The beauty gurus would be proud. Zack answered my question by whipping out his phone and dialing my Dad. I take that as a no. Dad picked up by the third ring, out of breath. I blushed as Zack wiggled his eyebrows suggestively.

"How is it going there in the apple?" Dad asked once he caught his breath. It didn't take a genius to guess what he was up to before Zack called. A workout of course.

"It's going, great sir. M is doing my makeup as we speak." Daddy Dearest gasped in the background.

"Are you pulling my leg? My daughter, Madeline, is applying makeup?" I rolled my eyes at the dramatic antics by my father.

"We're going to a Pastel Goth club in two hours." If my two fathers found this to be strange, they didn't voice it. Zack continued the conversation for a few more short minutes before ending the call.

"They're so getting down and dirty while you're gone," I responded by stabbing him in the gut with the makeup brush. Not funny.

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"I don't know about you but I feel ridiculously confident in this outfit," Zack said as he did his own version of a catwalk down the hotel hallway. I laughed and followed his lead. Once again Zack was dead on the money. The outfit so different then my usual attire made me feel strangely confident.

"I don't know about you but I want to dye my hair in a crazy color!" Zack shot me the are-you-serious look. Oh hell yes. Dead serious. Change is good. Plus if I hate it I can always dye my hair back brown.

"Tonight is going to be." Pause. Oh no. Please don't.

"Wait for it." Another pause.

"Legend-" Pause for dramatic build up.

"-dairy!" I rolled my eyes at the Barney reference before hailing a cab.

"You're such a dork!" Zack chuckled before throwing his arms over my shoulder.

"Oh, and don't you love me for it!" Once in the cab, Zack continued to show just how much of millennials we are by taking selfies and uploading the best one onto Instagram.

"You should get Instagram so I can tag you in all of the pictures." He mumbled as he scrolled through his feed. I gasped when I saw the picture of me sleeping in his arms, covered in greasy chicken nuggets and fries.

"Hey! Delete that right now!" Zack rolled his eyes and tapped on the picture to browse through the comments.

"Boy, some of these fuck boys are thirsty!" He stated and I simply shook my head and returned my attention to the window.

"You're the worst!" Zack ignored my snide comment and continued to scroll through his own Instagram pictures, opening a picture here and there to read the comments. Once he stalked his own feed for ten minutes, he moved onto stalking those of celebrities. I rolled my eyes when he found himself on Kylie Jenner's Instagram page. The boy was obsessed with the young social light.

"I fucking knew she was pregnant!" Zack gushed as he tapped onto the now famous picture of her holding Stormi's little hand.

"She's twenty years old and she just had a baby. Holy shit man. Can you imagine that two years from now you could be a mother?" I choked on my own spit.

"Oh hell no. I don't want kids." Zack rolled his eyes in response.

"You shouldn't be talking too much. You're twenty-five. You know your mom is going to start hounding you to settle down and tie the knot soon." I sneered and

Zack groaned dramatically, throwing his head back into the seat and closing his eyes.

"The women should just relax already. I just got back from deployment and I just need to relax and do nothing for like a year." Zack groaned and continued to rant about his mother and her desperate need to marry Zack off before he can run back to the army.

"Are you seriously going back in September?" My heart clenched at the idea of Zack on the battlefields. Now that we've grown closer, I couldn't help but worry that my friend would die in the dirt in some foreign country. Zack noticed my distress and pulled me into his arms.

"It's only for six months and then I'm done. Then you will be stuck with me forever!" Zack cackled in his iconic evil laughter. It wasn't long before I joined him. The big goofball always managed to put a smile on my face. The cabbie glanced to the backside from the rear-view window and I simply smiled back. The poor bloke probably thinks we're nuts. After awhile Zack returned his attention to stalking the famous Kardashian family. Ten minutes later the cabbie rolled to a halt before the club entrance. The neon lights lit up the night in bright colors. Dark Pink. A fitting name for the people spilling out of the open doors.

"Let's go make some awesome memories!" I squealed in excitement before dragging Zack out of the cab who hastily paid the cabbie.

"And some awesome pictures!" Zack added and I rolled my eyes. Instagram obsessed dork.

## *Chapter Five: Pink Nails*

"My buddies bet me that I wouldn't be able to start a conversation with the hottest person in the bar. Wanna buy some drinks with their money?" I turned my head to the girl that spoke. With long straight pink hair and my little pony bow, she blended into the crowd like a champ. At the same time, her blue eyes stood out from the dark eyeshadow. A pretty petite girl with a heart-shaped face but the smirk on her mouth said she was anything but the innocent little girl her appearance told her to be. That and the Goth skull choker.

"Let's buy the most expensive drink on the menu then." I winked in response. She laughed before holding out her hand in greeting.

"Hannah." I smiled and took her hand.

"M." She smirked before signaling the bartender.

"Would you grab my arm, so I can tell my friends I've been touched by an angel?" I laughed and grabbed her arm as requested.

"Your friends sure are demanding. Is there anything else they want us to do?" Wait. Am I flirting?

"They just wanted to know something..." Hannah paused leaning forward in her seat.

"Kiss me if I'm wrong, but dinosaurs still exist, right?" I laughed before leaning forward, licking my lips the closer I got. Hannah's eyes widened in shock before her gaze moved to my lips. A sly smirk crossed her lips and as I moved closer. Her eyes fluttered shut and her mouth puckered. I moved away and took a sip of my drink.

"Nice try, but it's going to take more than three pickup lines to get a kiss out of me!" I laughed. Hannah pouted before shaking her head and taking a sip of her drink with a chuckle.

"That's fair. I have twenty memorized." I laughed before glancing to Zack's direction. The boy seemed utterly pleased with the girl on his lap and tongue down his throat.

"Well, you're in luck. My company is preoccupied so I have some time to kill. Hit me with your best shot." I smirked while leaning back into the bar stool before sipping on my pink drink.

"They say Disneyland is the happiest place on earth. Well apparently, no one has ever been standing next to you." I raised my eyebrow at this one.

"Disneyland? Really? Come on I asked for your best one!" Hannah laughed before leaning forward.

"For some reason, I was feeling a little off today. But when you came along, you definitely turned me on." I laughed hard at this one.

"Now that was smooth!" Hannah smirked before moving closer till the point her knees brushed my own.

"I have a lot more where that came from. Let's make this into a fun little game. You score my pick up lines by 1 to 5. 1 is lame and 5 is worthy of a kiss. When

you get one worthy of a kiss you have to move a little closer to me and when you get a lame one you get to move away." I paused, pondering over her suggestion.

"And what is in it for me?" Hannah chuckles deeply before leaning forward, her face close to my ear.

"Me." She whispered before pecking the sensitive skin behind my ear. I shivered and bit my lip.

"Sounds like a good bet to me." Hannah pulled away with a sly smirk on her lips.

"Hey, you're pretty and I'm cute. Together we'd be Pretty Cute." 3. She moved her chair slightly forward.

"I may not be a genie, but I can make your dreams come true." 3. Her knees touched mine once more.

"Is your name Google? Because you have everything I've been searching for." 4. Her hand moved to the edge of my bar stool armrest, lightly brushing the skin of my arms.

"Hello. Cupid called. He wants to tell you that he needs my heart back." 1. She removed her arm with a slight smirk.

"Do you have a pencil? Cause I want to erase your past and write our future." 2. She touched the edge of my bar stool armrest, just out of reach of my arm.

"Can you take me to the doctor? Because I just broke my leg falling for you." 1. She removed her arm once again, the same old sly smirk hanging on her lips.

"There must be something wrong with my eyes, I can't take them off you." 1. She leaned back into her seat, her knees no longer touching mine.

"You don't need keys to drive me crazy." 3. She moved forward, her knees separating mine. Locking me in. It was quite clear she wasn't planning on letting me go. She was striving for the magical number five and to win the game with a kiss.

"Did the sun come out or did you just smile at me?" 3. She leaned forward, both of her arms resting on my armrest.

"I must be in a museum because you truly are a work of art." 4. She leaned forward, her face only inches from mine. The sly smirk hanging from her lips as her sweet breath tickled my nose. She smells so good.

"I'm no mathematician, but I'm pretty good with numbers. Tell you what, give me yours and watch what I can do with it." And with that, she earns a five and seals the deal with a hot kiss on my lips.

"You know when I found out you're into girls, this is what I wanted to see." I chuckled at Zack's words, leaning further into Hannah's lap. She was slowly trailing her fingers up and down my arms, leaving a trail of goosebumps behind. After a hot make-out session right there at the bar, we pulled away panting for breath. Zack pulled up the chair close to our little spot by the lounge before setting down his drink in front of him.

"This one girl gave me this." I glanced at his hands. Pink nail polish. How fitting. I placed my hand onto the table and without another word, he slowly started to paint my nails in the light pastel pink.

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"Tonight was insane. Hannah was so into you and damn girl you were all over her! Tell me everything!" Zack gushed as the cabbie drove us back to our hotel hours later. I blushed before telling Zack everything he missed before he found us making out by the bar.

"Damn the girl is smooth. I should remember a few of those. What was your favorite?" I hummed as I pondered over his question.

"The one that got her the kiss for sure." Zack laughed before leaning into my side, resting his head onto my shoulder.

"This has been really fun M. I really needed this..." He trailed off as his voice hitched in emotion.

"You don't have to say anything. I'm here for you." I replied, pecking his forehead before returning my attention to the window. Zack's snores filled the cabbie minutes later. I meant every damn word. I will always be there for him. I will support him in all his future crazy adventures. I will smooth away his nightmares and I will feed him chocolate chip cookies. I smiled holding his hand. Our matching pink nails glowed as the street lights hit them. Maybe falling hopelessly in love and having your heart broken by your best friend is a good thing. My close friendship with Zack did start after all when he found me crying my eyes out in his living room.

It was a few weeks into Sasha and John's relationship. The two was attached to the hip, you couldn't find the one without the other. Sasha no longer had time for me and if she did it wasn't even real. I would come over for our usual marathon night or game night and she would spend the entire night on her phone. It was lonely and for the first time in our friendship, a guy was more important than me. In all of her previous relationships, our friendship remained the same. John was different. She loved him. Heck, she lost her virginity to him. She called me the second he left and begged me to come over. I rushed over, thinking that just maybe the two broke up and I would get my best friend back. Why I thought that was beyond me but like a complete twat I raced to her house and ran to her bedroom, excited and anxious at the same time. She was so overjoyed about their lovemaking, the words spilled out of her mouth before her bedroom door could close behind me.

"John and I had sex!" The news quite literally took my breath away. My heart clenched and cracked at the news. My deluded and hopeful mind dreamt that our first time would be together, something special. In that very moment, it became painfully clear that my best friend would never love me romantically. My skin

turned cold and my heart dropped into my stomach. Sasha rambled on and on about her first sexual encounter while I forced a smile here and there. If she found my behavior strange, she didn't speak of it. Instead, her attention turned towards her phone as John's caller ID flashed on her screen. I took that as my cue to leave. I forced another smile and bid my goodbye. It was only once I was downstairs and out of hearing shot that I allowed myself to cry. A big heartbreakingly sob escaped my throat as I dropped to the floor and curled myself into a little ball. Zack found me there and after pulling me into his arms, he whispered comforting words into my hair. Once I calmed down, he led me up to his bedroom where I proceeded to spill the beans about my unrequited love and his sister's sexual awakening. From that moment, Zack became my rock. A close friend to lean on. A brother that would always support and love me and I became that for him. A close friend he could open up about his time in the army. The pain and heartbreak he felt for his fallen brother. The terror of the gruesome nightmare he experienced. It was his turn to cry and my turn to rock him inside my arms and whisper sweet nothings into his buzz cut. I became his rock. A close friend to lean on. A sister that would always support and love him.

## *Chapter Six: Dancing Queen*

"So tell me again what exactly this competition is." Zack sighed before rolling over to his side. It was currently late afternoon and we have yet to leave our hotel room. After our early arrival from our night out in town as pastel Goths, we slept in till noon, had a late breakfast before walking straight back to our room to become one with the bed as useless reality TV played in the background. Zack tapped on his phone and scrolled through his Instagram while I read a short story on Wattpad. Something called *My Alpha Mate Got Me Pregnant And He Loves It*. A werewolf story. As this was a trip all about trying out a new thing, exploring a new genre was called for.

"So it's one of those dance for hours thing and one something," Zack muttered as this would make perfect sense and explain the entire competition. Once I didn't respond to his explanation, he glanced up from his phone and sighed. Well, I'm sorry that I don't magically understand the competition by your 12 worded sentence.

"So the competition works like this. You have to be in contact with your partner at all times and move slightly. This could be rocking from side to side or full-on dancing. There are different marks that could strive for. The last couple standing goes home with the biggest prize, a five thousand dollar check while other participants get prizes for the number of hours they reach. Three hours is a free Starbucks coffee and muffin. Five hours is a fabulous T-shirt and a McDonald happy meal. Seven hours is a 20 dollar gift card to Target and the same old fabulous T-shirt. Ten hours is a 50 dollar gift card to Target and again the T-shirt. Fifteen hours is a 200 dollar gift card to Target, a voucher for a free full course meal at this pizza joint and the stupid T-shirt again. Twenty hours is a 500 dollar gift card to Target, the full course meal at the pizza joint, free beer all night at this one club and the stupid T-shirt. After that point, it's just whoever is still standing and goes for the big prize." Well, now that makes sense.

"It sounds like fun. What time does it start?" It's something new and different. Very much so outside my comfort zone but it should be a lot of fun.

"8 pm. So we should just stay in bed all day till we have to go. You know preserve our energy." Zack replied before returning his attention to his social media. I nodded before rolling onto my side and returning to the werewolf world of Wattpad.

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"Tell me exactly why I'm wearing this frumpy prom dress?" Zack rolled his eyes before fixing his tie.

"M. It's a dancing competition," Zack stated in a tone that meant that I was stupid for not connecting the frumpy prom dress to the dancing competition. I sighed before throwing my hands up in the air in surrender. You can't convince

crazy about anything. If he decided that we couldn't possibly compete in this competition without going all out with our costume, then well I guess I'm wearing a stupid pink prom dress with flowers and something I would never physically choose for my own prom in a few months.

"What did my dad's say when you called?" I asked as I tucked my curly brown hair up in a messy bun.

"Rick made me promise to take pictures of you in your dress. In fact, he said I wasn't allowed to ever show my face again if I don't take pictures..." Zack trailed off before winking. I sighed, surrendering to my fate and striking a pose. Daddy Dearest wasn't playing around. He would very well stay true to his promise and would chase Zack away before he could even step onto our driveway.

"Put some pep in your step. Rick is expecting great things from me." Zack mumbled before dropping to the ground to get a short from the ground. I sighed, the silly boy can't do anything half ass.

"Come on M! Stop fussing over your dress and get out of the damn car!" Zack huffed before taking matters into his own hands and pulled me out of the cabbie.

"I look ridiculous. No. We look ridiculous." Zack rolled his eyes, clearly enjoying being the center of attention. To say that we're undressed would be the understatement of the century. It would be as in to say that without the sun there would be no life. Wait. That's not right. I glanced at the crowd once again before hiding my body behind Zack's large build. The men attired in dark a semi-formal black pants and a button up shirt while the woman wore semi-formal dresses. A tux and massive ball of poof of a pink prom dress didn't fit in with the dress code. Zack only chuckled at my horror before dragging me along to the entrance.

"You did this on purpose!" I screamed and huffed in anger. The sick little puppy.

"Come on M! Live a little!" Zack pouted and I sighed.

"Fine!" Zack smiled before spinning me into a circle.

"This is going to be so much fun! Let's go sign in!"

My knees threatened to buckle and collapse under my weight. This was a horrible idea. Two hours of dancing wasn't my idea of fun. The song came to an end and Zack smiled and spun me in the circle when the next song came on. I laughed before following his lead.

"Ooh! You can dance! You can jive! Having the time of your life!" Zack sang with so much spunk and passion, he affected the dancers behind us.

"Ooh, see that girl! Watch that scene! Dig in the dancing queen!" I joined him all the while laughing.

"Friday night and the lights are low! Looking out for a place to go! Where they play the right music! Getting in the swing!" I followed his cue with a couple of disco dancing that only Zack could create on the spot. The goofball might be crazy but he sure is a hella fun.

"You come to look for a king! Anybody could be that guy! The night is young and the music's high! With a bit of rock music! Everything is fine! You're in the mood for a dance! And when you get the chance!" Zack paused with a goofy chuckle before pulling me in for another spin.

"You are the dancing queen! Young and sweet! Only seventeen! Dancing queen! Feel the beat from the tambourine, oh yeah! You can dance! You can jive! Having the time of your life! Ooh, see that girl! Watch that scene! Dig in the dancing queen!" The crowd cheered as Zack and I gave the performance of our lives. I laughed and stepped into Zack's arms as the slow song played in the background. He rocked us side to side as we took the time to catch our breath.

"You're crazy!" Zack smirked before pinching my bum. I squealed and slapped his arm.

"Hey! Keep it clean!" Zack simply laughed as he moved me across the floor as the song came to an end and switched to a higher pace song. With energy unknown to normal humans, Zack danced to the beat of the song all the while pulling me along for the ride.

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I threw myself back onto the bed, the dress drowning Zack under layers of pink fabric. He rolled to his side to escape the frumpy dress, panting for breath. My legs burned and my feet pounded.

"I can't believe we danced for ten hours and we just have this stupid T-shirt to show for it!" I huffed as I threw the said T-shirt to the wall.

"Don't forget the 50 dollar gift card to Target!" I rolled my eyes. Oh yes, that made everything better.

"I don't have the energy to get out of this dress!" Zack simply laughed at my pain. "Let me!" Zack rolled over before climbing on top of me. He winked and tickled my sides. I panted and kicked against his hold but the heavy loaf pressed his weight on my waist, pushing me into the bed.

"Oh, you're so hilarious." I rolled my eyes before bucking my hips into the air, catching Zack of guard. He squeaked as he tumbled over to the side, missing the edge of the bed with inches and flopping onto the floor in one but thump. I laughed so hard until the point of tears running down my cheeks. After a few moments of grunting and groaning in self-pity and fake pain, Zack joined me in uncontrollable laughter.

"Thank you for everything," I said with a pause after a few minutes of silence. Zack poked his head up from the edge of the bed and smiled. My heart missed a beat and before I could over think the action. Zack got up and launched himself on to the bed. I screamed and scrambled up to my feet the best I could but the heavy frumpy dress dragged me to the ground. I fell back onto the bed with a bounce. Zack scrambled into action but the sheets tangled around his monkey suit

and pulled him along as the two of us bounced from the bed and landed on the ground with a heavy thump.

"Fucking hell that hurt!"

## *Chapter Seven: Valentine's Day*

I sighed and rubbed my eyes as I rolled onto my back. I arched my back and I stretched out the kinks from the previous night. Dancing for ten hours makes you ache in places you didn't know could ache. My fingers brushed on something cool and I frowned. What? I opened my eyes and frowned. Wait. What? I picked up the flower petal and glanced around the hotel room. Is that rose petals?

"Happy Valentine's Day!" Zack squealed, popping up from his hiding place behind the couch. I jumped at his unexpected arrival and frowned in confusion.

"Wait. What?" I rubbed at my eyes. Am I seeing things?

"I wanted to surprise you..." Zack pouted trailing off.

"It's the day of love you know..." I shook my head before smiling at the goofball that has changed my entire life.

"You're amazing, you know that right?" Zack grinned before strutting silly poses.

"Oh, baby I'm more than just amazing!" I laughed before wiggling my eyebrows and picked up a handful of rose petals.

"Oh and like what?" Before Zack could respond, I threw the roses in his directions. It's floated to the bed a few inches away from my position. Guess we can't have a rose fight.

"Romantic," Zack whispered smoothly and I rolled my eyes.

"Dork!"

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"So Rick actually set this one up," Zack stated casually as we browsed the store. I chuckled before fingers a long curly blond wig.

"I figured. He did drag a few years back." Daddy Dearest often spoke of his drag years with great fondness. He only stopped performing regularly when his restaurants took off and he simply didn't have the time anymore. He does whip out the wigs and glitter every few months though.

"Mandy, is that you?" I squealed before sprinting into the arms of Mama. He chuckled before lifting me up from the ground and pulling me into a tight bear hug.

"Oh well look at you! You look amazing, come on girl give me a trill." Zack beat me to the punch before my feet could even touch the floor. I laughed before joining him. Zack immediately pulled me into his arms and twirled me into a circle before dipping me right into the wig showcase. I narrowly missed hitting my head.

"Oops, my bad." I shook my head before punching him.

"Be gentle. I'm a lady." Zack poked out his tongue and rolled his eyes.

"If you say so..." Mama laughed loudly before throwing his arms over my shoulders and pulling me tight into his side.

"Come on, let's choose your outfit and Zack, my dear, I hope you're ready. You will tucking love this." I erupted in laughter at the confused look on his face. Oh, the poor boy. He doesn't know what tuck means. Mama and I shared a look, an evil plan forming between us without any spoken words.

I was right. Zack hated every second of the tucking process. The boy screamed from the pain and Donna, Mama's friend, and I shared a look before laughing loudly. Donna shook his head before returning his attention to my make up while Zack struggled in the loving arms of Mama in the hotel bathroom. 45 minutes later, Zack limped out in his body suit and new padded curves.

"That was..." Zack shivered in fear and hugged his body. Zack fell next to me on the bed, cupping his assets with a whimper.

"Alright girly! You're finished!" Donna stated with a smile. I smiled brightly, elated to be finished before jumping up from the bed to admire his handy work in the mirror.

"It looks so different! I love it! Hey Zack! Take a picture for my daddy dearest!" Zack simply just groaned before whipping out his phone to take one picture. Someone clearly isn't in the mood. I rolled my eyes and followed Mama to the couch. Our outfits laid out.

"Come on, why don't you get dressed and then I will do your hair. We don't have all night!" I nodded before picking up the long mermaid sequence dress. The dress was truly something of beauty with a sheer see-through corset bodice and long aqua swirls of lace at the bottom. It gave the illusion of a mermaid tail. Beautiful beads completed the look with a scale like pattern on the dress. It's a real mermaid dress.

"Oh wow Mama, this dress is so pretty!" First, it was the really puffy but pretty dress from yesterday and now this? Dressing up feels so good. Although I doubt I would ever admit that. Daddy Dearest would have a shopping trip of all shopping trips. A truly scary thought.

I glanced at Zack's dress and smiled. It should be so interesting to see him all dressed up in the tight little number that is his dress. The red satin dress would cling to every curve of his padded body, not hiding a single dip or bump. With large wing-like arms and a deep neckline, Zack would look absolutely magnificent in it. Truly Instagram worthy! I wonder what his army buddies would say if they saw him dressed to impress in this little red number. Zack the overconfident open-minded boy would probably walk through the base in full drag ready to give them a show that they will never forget. His bubbly personality is so inviting and freeing, some of them would even join them I'm sure.

"I chose a batwing dress for your boy that is a friend there to hide his big manly strong arms," Mama answered my unsaid question before ushering me into the bathroom.

"Yes, that's right! Bi strong and manly arms. Ouch!" Zack's voice followed us into the bathroom. Donna just hushed him and I laughed. Zack is truly best friend goals.

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I jumped up from my seat as I clapped my hands. Mama pulled Zack onto the stage soon after we arrived at her place. She introduced him to the crowd of queens before she nodded her head to the DJ. The powerful voice of Sia and her oh so outstanding song of Chandelier filled the room.

"Try to keep up!" Mama winked at Zack before she switched to her performance mode. She moved so gracefully, not missing a beat of the song as she crossed the stage, her sparkling golden dress following her every move. With grace she started to dance, Zack not wanting to be undone followed her lead. The boy knew the song by heart and whipped out his best dance moves.

"Party girls don't get hurt. Can't feel anything, when will I learn." Zack mouthed the words while dancing his heart out.

"I push it down, push it down."

The two played the push and pull act in union with the words, calling a massive cheer from the crowd. I screamed the loudest.

"One, two, three, on, two, three, drink." Zack incorporated the ballet dancing the girl did in the video after kicking his shoes off. I cheered and unlocked his phone to record the show.

"I'm gonna swing from the chandelier, from the chandelier. I'm gonna live like tomorrow doesn't exist, like it doesn't exist. I'm gonna fly like a bird through the night, feel my tears as they dry. I'm gonna swing from the chandelier, from the chandelier." Zack jumped, propelling himself forward in the little split move the ballet dancers do, ripping his dress on the side. The crowd cheered at him very fully grown manly hairy legs and I simply just laughed. Oh, this is gold.

"And I'm holding on for dear life, won't look down won't open my eyes." Zack dropped to the ground and whipped his head back, doing the little dramatic dance move they do in the movie. You know where he closes his eyes with his hands and then takes it down to his neck before making an X figure on his chest.

"Keep my glass full until morning light, 'cause I'm just holding on for tonight. Help me, I'm holding on for dear life, won't look down won't open my eyes..." The song continued and Zack continued to give it his all, Mama, however, wasn't one to back off from to fight and gave it her all. She owned the stage as she glided in smooth moves, *twerking* for the fun of it. The crowd loved every second of it. The two truly put on a once in a lifetime performance.

"You were amazing!" I squealed and jumped into Zack's arms after he stepped off the stage. Zack laughed and did the usual swirl. I giggled in his arms before fixing his wig.

"Come on my favorite little lady. It's your turn!" Oh, I'm ready for this.

## *Chapter 8: Perfectly Facing Fears*

"Are you having a great time? Zack has been sending so many pictures! You look so amazing in all of the outfits! Oh, the video of you lip synching to Selena Gomez song Hands To Myself nearly gave your dad a heart attack!" Daddy Dearest chuckled and I could picture him shake his head with a massive grin on his face.

"It's been amazing! Zack has the craziest ideas and I can't even guess what we're going to do next." The man of the hour simply rolled over to his side, a deep snore escaping his chest. His face smudged with last night's makeup. We got home in the early hours of the morning and after his performance, the boy was practically famous with the girls.

"He is such a lovely man! The captions about you on his pictures are so sweet. You should go read them. It can make any old girl swoon. You know if you two are dating, you can totally tell me, right?" My mouth dropped in surprise. Wait. What?

"Hold up. What did you just say?" My mind reeled but Daddy Dearest didn't hear my confused words and continued babbling on about how cute my dress from last night was and etc. 30 minutes later, I ended the call, still incredibly confused. Wait. What? What captions and what pictures? My curiosity got the best of me and I created an account on my laptop. What is his handle again? How do I find him? Minutes passed and I have yet to even find his account, I opted for opening his Instagram on his phone. 3000hearts and 800comments. Oh, holy shit. That's insane. After tapping on all of the little icons, trying to find his profile, and possibly liking random pictures, I opened his feed. The little picture of him in his army clothes in the corner should've been a dead giveaway from the start. I gasped in shock.

The boy has been posting about our week away left and right with an average of three pictures per day. He had the messy hotel room and my greasy ass knocked out on the bed. I frowned. The boy still hasn't deleted the picture of me sleeping in his arms, covered in greasy chicken nuggets and fries. I tapped on the photo and froze when I read the caption.

"I could wake up like this every single day." Did he mean covered in soggy fries and soaked with grease right? I exit the picture in haste. There is so many more. A picture of me trying on wigs for the Pastel Goth look, a full-on duck face in the mirror moment. I cringed. That's ridiculously embarrassing. His caption read; "She's beautiful without even trying." The next picture was our selfie in the cabbie with the caption: "Those eyes can read me like a book." Wait, is that a compliment? What the hell do these captions even mean? I continued to scroll through his feed, tapping on every picture and reading the caption. My mind reeling as the man of the hour continued to snore next to me.

A picture of me talking to Hannah at the bar. It must've been around the time she was throwing those pick up lines as I was all smiles and Hannah had me locked in. The caption read; "If only she would smile at me like that." A picture of him painting my nails as I laughed at something he most likely said. His back faced the camera. Who on earth even took this picture and why didn't I even notice it being taken? The caption read; "I would cross a dessert for this girl." A picture of me in my pink prom dress, strutting my best pose for my Daddy Dearest. The caption read; "So utterly beautiful. She stole my breath away." A picture of the two of us dancing, he was raising me a little in his arms as I smiled down on him. He mirrored my bright smile with his own. The caption read; "If only the song would never end." Who even took this picture? A picture of me sleeping between the roses with the caption; "Her beauty rivals that of the roses she lays in." A picture of me performing the Hands to Myself song of Selena Gomez. I gasped. Wait. Is that how I looked while performing? Ouch. His caption read; "I can't keep my hands to myself but I mean I could but why would I want to?" I chuckled at that one. The boy sure is clever. His latest picture only posted five hours ago, was of the two of us in full drag. It was taken just after his performance. I was in his arms, bridal style, full of smiles. His caption read: "I tucking love you." His phone dropped from my hands and I shook my head. No. he doesn't mean that. Daddy Dearest words floated into my head: "You know if you two are dating, you can totally tell me, right?" We're not dating, right? Does he love me like a brother? He was only fooling around in the captions. Am I just reading them wrong? I glanced at the sleeping man and sighed. Nope. I pinched my temples, desperately fighting off a growing headache. Nope. Not going to deal with this now. I dropped back into the bed and closed my eyes. Yes. Let's take a nap.

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"You're out of your damn mind if you think for even one second that I will go up on that stage and sing." Zack simply rolled his eyes and ignored my statement completely.

"Come on! You full on gave the performance of a lifetime last night! What's the difference?" It was my turn to roll my eyes and shake my head in pity and the poor delusional idiot. He doesn't even know the difference between lip synching and singing for real. I pity the fool. Zack pulled me towards the direction of the stage, adamant about his mission. The goal? Get M to sing on open mike night. I stood my ground and dug my heels into the floor. Nope. Not happening, buddy. There is no way I'm going to sing in front of all of these people. Nope. In your dreams buddy. Zack turned and pouted, giving it his best puppy look. My resolve slowly melted.

"Come on! I will sing it with you!" Zack continued to pout and reluctantly I agreed. Zack smiled brightly before pulling me towards the stage once more. I muttered under my breath the entire way.

"What are we even going to sing?"

"Perfect by Ed Sheeran." I sighed slowly, forcing my lungs to exhale breath slowly before inhaling the same amount once more.

"Fine, but if I throw up it's on you." Ever since I've been a little girl, I suffered stage fright. Although considering last night you wouldn't be able to tell. I hate being the center of attention. My heart starts to desperately try to escape my chest. I break out in a cold sweat and my entire body turns red. Ugly and quite obvious red rashes spread from my chest, upon my neck and turn my ears into glowing devices. My entire face turns red and my eyes start to water. My body shakes and my stomach turns and finally, if the attention is too much, I end everything with vomit and a faint. Zack knows this about me and yet here he is, sweet talking me into something that would spike an episode.

"Just focus on me! Nothing else. There is no one in the room but us two okay." Zack squeezed my hand and smiled. Slowly I nodded. There is no one in the room but us two. Just focus on Zack. Just focus only on him. Nothing else. No one else. Zack handed me the mike with a reassuring smile before he nodded to the side. Seconds later the music started and my blood ran cold. Focus on Zack. Nothing else. No one else. It's only us two. I always sing around Zack.

"I found a love for me. Darling just dive right in and follow my lead. Well, I found a girl beautiful and sweet." I smiled as Zack sang. He wasn't the best singer out there in the world but he could keep a tune. I simply just watched Zack as he read the words in front of him. His soft curly brown hairs, now overgrown, tickled his forehead as he worked the stage.

"I never knew you were the someone waiting for me." His deep sky blue eyes twinkled under the lights.

"Cause we were just kids when we fell in love." My eyes roamed from his blue eyes, pausing at his long eyelashes before landing on his freckled and crooked nose.

"Not knowing what it is. I will not give you up this time. But darling, just kiss me slow, your heart is all I own-" My eyes landed on his lips and my breath stalled in my throat. His bright dimpled smile could light up a room.

"-But you heard it, darling, you look perfect tonight." At this Zack turned to face me and nodded. It's my turn now. I swallowed my fear and waited for my cue.

"Well, I found a man, stronger than anyone I know. He share my dreams, I hope that someday I'll share a home-" I lost myself in the sweet melody. My fears all forgotten. It's just us in this room. I'm just singing in front of Zack like I always do. Together we ended the song, leaning into each other as we sang through my mike:

"You look perfect tonight." I smiled out of breath and paused. I could faintly hear the cheers from the crowd, but the only thing I could see is Zack beaming in joy. My focus only on Zack. Nothing else. No one else. It's just us two.

## *Chapter Nine: Falling With You*

Zack was the one that broke the spell. He moved away, turned to the crowd and bowed. I blinked before slowly following his lead, giving a stiff and awkward bow towards the crowd. What just happened? We moved to leave the stage before the crowd started to chant. It took my brain a few seconds to process what they were saying and I froze.

"Kiss! Kiss! Kiss!" What the hell is happening? Zack sees me as his sister. He is my brother, my best friend and someone I can always count on. There are no romantic feelings between us. Why is there suddenly romance left and right? For god sake, I'm in love with HIS sister! I paused at this, when is the last time I even spared Sasha a single thought? When is the last time she might me laugh and cry from joy? When is the last time she was remotely the same person I fell in love with? It's not like Zack just swooped in and replaced her. I've known Zack the same amount of time that I've known Sasha. We've been friendly to each other over the years. A greeting here and there. Small talk in the hall. We would spike up a conversation if we met in public and more. Zack would even sometimes join us for a movie when Sasha and I used to have marathons in the living room.

"Kiss! Kiss! Kiss!" The crowd continued to chant, sending my mind in turmoil. I don't want this. I love what I have with Zack. I made eye contact with Zack and frowned at his expression. It was unreadable. I had no idea what the man was thinking. The crowd continued to chant and before I could run from the stage, Zack leaned forward and pecked my lips. It was such a quick peck that my brain didn't even process it was happening until it was already finished and Zack was leading me off the stage. I blinked in complete shock before making eye contact with Zack. In the exact same moment, we exploded in laughter. And just like that all the tension and doubts just vanished as overwhelming amounts of relief flooded my entire body. I relaxed and jumped into Zack's arms! I did it! I actually sang on stage in front of a crowd of strangers.

"Thank you!"

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I groaned as Zack moved in his sleep for the sixth time in the last five minutes. The man is a restless sleeper and I could kill him for it. Knowing Zack he has this crazy adventure planned for the day but honestly, I will be pretty happy with sleeping in all day. 5 days of crazy and exciting days are enough for me to thank you very much. We can spend the last two days never leaving the bed and binge watch MasterChef. Zack moved again, this time rolling into my side of the bed and throwing half of his body over mine. I heaved and started to struggle under his heavy embrace. After a few desperate attempts to wiggle out underneath him failed miserably, I simply jabbed him under his ribs with my elbow which awoke him from his slumbers to say it nicely. Zack jumped up in fright pushing me

behind him, fully alert and ready to fight. This pulled at my heart strings but I forced a giggle out of my throat and slapped his back.

"No threat here minus my ability to breath." Zack turned to face me, utterly confused.

"You were crushing me in your sleep silly." Very slow the words sunk into his brain and his eyes widened in relation. He laughed before falling back onto the bed.

"I'm sorry. Was I moving a lot?" Zack pouted before yanking me down to his level. I shook my head and cuddled into his side.

"Not at all." I breathed out in a sigh. For a big bulky guy, Zack is so soft and warm to cuddle with.

"Sarcasm?" I laughed.

"Yes."

"So what is on the agenda today? Do I get to know now or do I find out later?" I asked a few hours later once we finally started to stir as life, or well hunger pulled us from the bed. Zack paused, his pancake hovering before his lips. He chuckled and shot me this look that screamed for-me-to-know-and-for-you-to-find-out. You know that shit-eating grin with a naughty glint in his eyes. That look.

"Find out later it is." I turned my attention to my plate of food and smiled. This short week is life changing. Maybe this is what I want to do for the rest of my life. Go on one crazy adventure after another. With Zack.

"Alright so after breakfast we should get dressed and head on out. I figured we can take the train till there and then afterward you can decide what you want us to do." I nodded and took a bite of creamy pancakes. Heaven send.

"Can I guess what we're going to do?" Zack simply hummed before stuffing his face with an entire pancake.

"Concert?" No. "Theatre?" No. "A show?" Zack paused and looked up from his plate with a frown?

"Is there some show you want to go see or something?" I laughed and nodded.

"Dirty Dancing." At this Zack groaned before rolling his eyes and returning his attention to his plate of food.

"It's at 9 pm and they still have some tickets left. Please." I pulled my best puppy look out. I pouted, forcing myself to cry a little and trembled my lip. Zack glanced at me, chuckled and returned his attention to his food once more. Rude.

"Pretty please with a cherry on top?" I whimpered for added effect. A few moments passed before Zack finally sighed and agreed. Victory is mine!

"Come on, finish. We have to be there by 1:30 pm."

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"If you think for one single moment that I'm going to jump out of this plane with you, you're nuts." Zack ignored me and continued to talk to the instructor.

"Come on M. Live a little. I've done this many times before. You're going to love every second of it." I simply pouted, but the man was slowly winning me over like always.

"Have I steered you wrong before?" I sighed and begrudgingly settled into my seat ready for a quick lesson on the sport of skydiving. The instructor explained how everything works and how it will go before we moved on into getting the gear on us. As Zack is a professionally trained skydiver, he was allowed to jump with me. Normally average human folk attached themselves to a professional of the company but well I get to jump out of a plane attached to my best friend. Fun. I bit my lip and forced myself to take long and even breaths. My heart hammered in my chest at a painful speed as Zack tightened the gear around my body. Why am I going to do this?

"Alright, everything is good to go. Are you ready?" I swallowed a rock of spit before uttering a very pathetic yes. Zack simply smiled before guiding me to the golf cart that will hopefully not drive me to my untimely demise.

"Trust me M." Zack turned my head and steered into my eyes. My heart stilled and started to race for an entirely different reason. That stupid kiss and Instagram captions are screwing with my brain. Don't think about it M. He is your brother. Remember you love his sister? Unbeknown to my inner turmoil, Zack continued.

"You're going to love it. I know what I'm doing. I won't ever put you in danger." Slowly his words sunk through my chaotic brain and I nodded. He is right. I faced the small little plane and as the golf cart rolled to a stop, pure determination ran through my body. Let's do this!

Zack climbed into the plane first before helping me up. We sat on the floor, greeted the pilot before we started to move down this highway. The plane turned, moved forward, building speed before the wheels left the road and we soared into the sky. My heart just stopped but with a firm grip on my hand, Zack reminded me to stay strong. You're going to love this M. I blinked for second before Zack announced that we need to prepare everything and we should reach the ideal height in two minutes. How over ten minutes passed is beyond me. I slowly almost robotically moved towards Zack. He pulled me into a hug before spinning me around and attaching our gear together. He double checked my helmet and everything again before attaching the video camera to his arm.

"Are you ready?" I couldn't get myself to speak so I nodded. The pilot counted down and I closed my eyes as Zack moved us forward. "Remember legs and arms out." Before I could respond, Zack hurled us out of the moving plane and I screamed my lungs out. I only stopped screaming once Zack opened the parachute and our descent down to earth slowed. That's when my screaming turned into full-blown laughter. Zack joined in. He was right. I did love every second of it.

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I was still smiling hours later as we got ready for the show. The adrenaline of the jump not quite gone yet. After calling my dad's to share the news, which proceeded them to get a near heart attack on the phone. Apparently, Daddy Dearest didn't feel compelled to share the plan to Dad and he was everything but happy. Zack managed to smooth over the entire situation with smooth talking and changing the topic.

"If we leave now, we can grab a quick bite to eat before the show," Zack said and I simply nodded before pulling on my pants. I'm all about the pant-less life.

"I'm ready when you are." Zack rolled his eyes, grabbed his phone and wallet before ushering me out of the hotel room. "I can't believe tomorrow is our last day here in New York. This trip has been absolutely amazing." I paused overwhelmed with emotion.

"Thank you!" Zack smiled, pulled me into his arms and pecked my forehead.

"Anytime!" He paused, opened his mouth to say something but simply shook his head and hailed a taxi.

"Come we have a show to watch!" I nodded and followed him into the yellow cab. What did he want to say?

## *Chapter Ten: Chocolate Chip Cookies*

Zack threw himself onto the bed with a groan, completely and utterly exhausted. With a shit eating grin, I twirled around the hotel room. Dirty Dancing has been my favorite movie as long as I can remember and the cast did an amazing job to capture the spirit of the movie. Zack personally loathed watching romance movies and was bored out of his skull throughout the entire show.

"Come to bed M. I'm exhausted!" Zack groaned clearly not amused by my antics. I laughed before twirling myself all the way to bed and gracefully launch myself on to the bed and Zack. He grunted in response and simply rolled me off his back, swung his arm over my body and locked me into place. I smiled and adjusted to a more comfortable position still very much so trapped in his embrace and close my eyes. My body ached all over but with a smile on my face; I fell asleep completely happy.

Waking up and starting the day was incredibly slow and stiff. The last six days of crazy activities finally caught up to us both and the only thing we desired was to sleep the day away. Zack, however, pushed me out of bed with the promise that nothing too crazy is planned for our last day in New York.

"It's pretty relaxed. You mostly just have to sit there and let the magic happen." I moaned in response and buried my face into my pillow. Sounds great. Zack's phone buzzed on the bedside table and he quickly rolled to his side, finally setting me free, to answer the call. Before Zack could greet the caller, they launched into a full on rant so loudly I could pick up who was speaking, Sasha. A mixture of emotions flooded my system, emotions that surprised me. Annoyance. Anger. Just why I was annoyed with the girl I'm supposed to be in love with was beyond me. Am I even in love with her? This new version of her...I sighed and rubbed my forehead as a growing headache seemed to develop at my new train of thoughts. Zack ended the call just as angry and annoyed before not so gently slamming his phone back onto the bedside table.

"Well, I'm up. Do you want to get some breakfast?" Zack finally asked after a few moments of silence. I nodded before getting up and popping my joints with a few stretches.

"I just quickly want to hop into the shower before we go."

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"So what is the game plan for the day?" I asked as I took another bite of the delicious egg and cheese bread. Zack nodded indicating his mouth was full of food and he would need a minute. I nodded in response and took a sip of my coffee. Damn this café can do nothing wrong. Even the coffee tasted better than normal.

"We're going to the hair salon." Zack simply said and without any other explanation returned his attention to the burger in front of him. If his moans were anything to go by, he was enjoying the food just as much as I was.

"I could fucking marry this burger and be a happy man for the rest of my life," Zack said with such seriousness I could actually picture the event. I laughed and couldn't help but agree.

"I could marry this coffee and never go to bed sad." I took another sip of the coffee at this statement.

"Yeah because with all that caffeine you would be to hop up to ever go to bed." I laughed and clutched at my heart with an overdramatic gasp.

"Someone is feeling sassy today!" Zack smiled proud of his newfound sassiness and stole a bite of my bread. I growled and stabbed him with my fork. Or attempted to do so but his training reflexes outmatched my skills.

"I can say the same thing to you..." Zack trailed off when I shot him a filthy glare. No one steals my food.

After breakfast, we headed down the busy streets of the center of New York. Zack kept a firm grip on my back as he steered me towards the direction of the hair salon.

"I do kind of need a trim. My hair is getting way too long." I mumbled before fingering the end of my brown hair. They were split beyond the point of split and grass dry. I definitely need a trim. Finally, we arrived at the hair salon and the lady quickly swooned over Zack. The man was a fine piece of work if I would have to say so myself and every normal straight woman are going to shoot a few glances. The man of the hour tried to act like he didn't know any better but the little half smirk playing on his lips said otherwise. I shook my head and got comfortable in the chair. The hairdresser finally recovered over the initial shock to the system at his company stood behind me and picked up my long brown hair with a frown.

"So what do you want to do today?" I opened my mouth to answer but Zack beat me to the punch.

"Can you do this and keep it a surprise from her?" The hairdresser leaned over, closer than necessary might I add, to see the image on his phone. She frowned and glanced at me with a clear question on her mind.

"It's okay. I trust him. Whatever he chooses is probably perfect." Plus if he makes me look like shit I will have revenge I added in my head. Zack smiled at my response and after a few more minutes of hesitation, or a few minutes to soak up the closeness of Zack, the hairdresser nodded before moving to the back room.

"Am I going to get any hints?" Zack simply shook his head and helped the shop assistant to cover the mirror. A complete surprise it is.

There was no way I would've ever guessed what hairdo I would be walking out of the hair salon, hours later after entering. Maybe a new cut and some highlights

to break up my mousy brown hair but a shoulder-length ombré blue hairdo weren't one of them. A stark contrast to my normal do but boy did I love it. I fingered my hair, still shocked at the color before glancing towards Zack with a big smile. The man really does know me. "I knew you would like it! Are you ready for the next stop?" I could only nod, lost for words. I always wanted to do something crazy with my hair but never had the courage to take the leap. My heart swelled at his actions and emotions I have yet to even process bloomed. Without a moment of hesitation, I took Zack's hand and followed his lead. I'm sure whatever he has planned next is just what I want.

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My heart hammered in my chest as I watched the tattoo artist prepared the stencil. A delicate and small chocolate chip cookie. Zack settled into the seat, his hand of the choice on the armrest. Ready for his first tattoo. The idea of having a matching tattoo with Zack made my mind swirl with so many thoughts and emotions, I couldn't even begin to understand them. I sat down next to him and held his free hand as the artist finally placed the stencil on the outer part of his wrist. The idea was if we would hold hands, the two cookies would be next to each other. Minutes later everything was prepared and ready to go. I closed my eyes at the first buzz of the machine but quickly opened them so I could watch the tattoo I would receive in a few minutes come to life. I flinched as the needles pressed into Zack's skin and shot him a glance. The man looked completely bored and pain-free. I relaxed and watched the artist work on the small little tattoo. 30 minutes he was finished. The end result was perfect and I very excitedly swapped places with Zack. The artist cleaned up everything and replaced the needles in the gun before placing the stencil on my wrist. After testing how the two would look next to each other once we held hands, we deemed it perfect and ready to ink. The tattoo gun buzzed again and I flinched and nearly pulled my hand away at the first touch but Zack kept me in place. His firm grip on my free hand gave me enough strength that I bit through the process. It fucking hurts! The 30 minutes passed painfully slow but the finished product made my heart race and a smile to cross my face. It's perfect. After wrapping my tattoo and instructing us both again on the aftercare of the tattoo, we paid and left.

"Want to go back to the hotel and watch movies in bed?" Zack asked as we walked hand in hand, cookie to cookie, back to the hotel.

"God yes."

## *Chapter Eleven: The Fight*

Daddy Dearest pulled me in for a hug before I even fully opened the door. I laughed and he picked me up for a full-on bear hug. I inhaled his sugar scent and smiled. One week away from one of your favorite humans in the whole world can feel like forever.

"I missed you so much!" Another set of arms circled my body and I welcomed it.

"Never leave us again sweetheart." Dad pouted and I chuckled.

"You do know I'm supposed to spread my wings and leave the nest next year right?" Daddy Dearest cried dramatically and tightened his grip.

"Don't remind us!" Zack cleared his throat behind us.

"Where's my hug?" Daddy Dearest pulled him into a hug before he could even finish his sentence.

"Tell me everything!" Dad demanded when Daddy Dearest finally released us. I smiled and dragged the two fathers to the lounge. For the next hour, Zack and I went into great detail about the entire week and then showed off our tattoos. It was only then when Dad noticed the new hairdo and nearly had a heart attack. It also didn't help that his sweet daughter was now permanently inked. Zack cleverly made a run for it before Dad could even move. The two then ran through the house while I continued to tell Daddy Dearest about the best week ever.

I dropped onto my bed in a heavy heap, completely spent from the chaos that was my welcome home greeting. I rolled onto my side and pulled out my phone. One week without it was a dream. There wasn't any distraction and spam like texts only when I was needed. I sighed as my thoughts moved to Sasha. Am I still in love with her? She surely isn't the girl I fell in love with anymore. It's just the boyfriend this and that. She always cancels on whatever plans we do make and if we by some miracle actually go through with the plans she's on her phone the entire time and always bails early. I mean, I guess I can kind of understand where she is coming from. She's in this new relationship and it's exciting but I mean come on, the best friend here! My week with Zack was so utterly perfect. These last few months he has been a better friend than she has. I sighed and finally switched my phone back on. These pathetic little thoughts are disgusting really. I hate that I can't make one single decision. Always backtracking and second guessing myself. Always reluctant for change. Always whining and hating my situation but doing nothing to change it. I screamed into my pillow as traitor tears rolled down my cheeks.

"Being a teenager is so hard!" Before I could facepalm myself at my typical the world is cruel teenager whine, my phone buzzed uncontrollably. One quick glance at the screen told me that Sasha was anything but pleased with my running off to New York with her brother for a week act. Now she cares. I paused at my train of thoughts. Do I even still like her? Much less love, the way things are

sounding in my brain I don't love her at all. Did I just fall out of love with her? Is that even possible? It could also be that I'm still in love with her but my feelings of annoyance are numbing that feeling? Married couples get annoyed with each other but the love is still there...right? I rubbed my temples and got up. I guess I just have to go to her place and talk...Dread settled into my stomach and with a heavy heart, I drove the bicycle to see the person I'm in love with. Or maybe just my best friend? Every little roll of the wheel forward, my anger and frustration at the entire situation grew and grew. By the time I rang her doorbell and Sasha threw the door open with a bang, my anger was ready to explode.

"Where the fuck have you been? I've been calling you nonstop for a week now. How could you just go off in the sunset with my *brother* of all people with telling me anything? You're so selfish! I needed you M! But like always you just do whatever the hell you want. You don't care. It's just me, me and me! I mean what the actual fuck M? You just left and worst of all you just switched off your phone! That was a fucking bitch move and you know it! Best friend my ass! I-" Looking back if I just took a deep breath and over thought the entire situation like I always did, maybe the incident could've been avoided. However, if you bottle all of your feelings up, you are bound to explode when you're pushed too far. For the first time in our long friendship, I raised my voice.

"ARE YOU FUCKING KIDDING ME? I'M THE BAD BEST FRIEND? Look at yourself in the fucking mirror next time, Sasha! You haven't been my friend in months. It's just all about Sasha! Like fucking always." I should've stopped. If the hurt expression on her face was anything to go by, my words were cutting deep. I couldn't stop though. The bottle was in pieces. I couldn't hold back my inner and darkest feelings.

"You fucking disgust me. You just throw yourself at the first boy that even glances at you and obey his every fucking demand. News flash Sasha! He is fucking half of the cheerleading team. I-" The slap echoed in the air and silenced the fight. I cupped my cheek in shock, my mind reeling. What just happened? Sasha slammed the door closed, the wood hitting my nose as it swung into place. I screamed from the pain.

"YOU FUCKING BITCH! I HATE YOU!"

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The next two months was awkward and tense, to say the least. For the last 8 years, Sasha and I ate together at lunch with a crew of friends we met along the way. Every day we would meet up at the lockers and walk to class together. For the last 8 years, Sasha has been my only friend. The day after the fight, Sasha and the girls I could maybe have considered as friends the day before was huddled around her locker. Sasha was red-eyed and sobbing into her arms as her friends gushed around her with soothing words. They all glanced up at my appearance and the ugly glare from the group told me everything I needed to know. However since

we've been basically attached to the hip for years, we couldn't actually go throughout our day without seeing each other. We share 5 of the 7 classes for fuck's sake. Instead of crawling back to her side, begging for forgiveness on my knees, I took my lunch and left the cafeteria in search of a new place. It was times like these, where I sit alone under a tree eating stale bread that I wish Zack went to our school. I huffed, annoyed about the entire situation. Why am I suddenly the bad guy? I only said what she needed to hear. It's not my fault she can't handle the fucking truth. I mean suddenly I'm shunned and glared at every fucking class we share. I mean it's been two fucking months already. Climb off your high horse and smell the shit storm. I rolled my eyes when I saw the little mindless hyenas throw me a glare when I passed their table on my way out. I threw the finger over my shoulder and moved to my beloved tree. Over these last two months as the official new loner of the school, I slowly fell into a routine. I would start off my morning with a mini glare off with the girls that always seems to hover around our lockers, almost waiting for my arrival. Once I arrived and I'm in earshot they would then proceed to overdramatic laugh about something. I would then ignore them, get my shit from my locker and move on with my day. This process of glare and fake laughter would repeat every time they noticed I was in earshot. Sasha was the worst though. She was loving every second of the attention and seemed to add oil to the fire as her minions just soaked up her bullshit. The absolutely most pathetic part of the whole show that I'm so much better off without you is that the dumb girl is still falling for John's bullshit. As the entire sticking her tongue down his throat every second I was in eyesight was anything to go by. Why are you so bothered about me? You do you, honey. I'm fucking sick and tired of your bullshit anyway. At lunch, they always switched things up. I mean you got to somehow keep your boring mindless life interesting. They went out of their fucking way to shoot me pity glances and talk very loudly might I add about their plans. Like that would accomplish anything. I would then roll my eyes, shoot the finger and move to my tree where I stuffed my face with whatever food the cafeteria was trying to pass as food. After I would finish lunch I would spend the remaining time before class starts playing the piano game on my phone. I was addicted to the game and the soothing sounds of the piano seemed to melt all of the tension away. The same glares and hyena laughter would follow the rest of the day until I finally found sweet release from the childish bullshit in my two classes I didn't share with the group.

Finally, the school would release me from my own personal prison around 3 pm and I would bike home and dump myself on the bed. <What time are you coming over?> Zack didn't respond to my text but by the sound of the doorbell ringing answered for him. <Stop ringing the doorbell and just come up already!> The sound of the door being opened was quickly followed by the sound of his heavy boots on the stairs. Zack dropped onto my bed, narrowly nearly crushing me to death. I laughed and shoved his side.

"How was school?" He finally asked, his face still in my pillow.

"Mind-numbing like usual." Zack sighed at my response and finally glanced up from the pillow.

"Still fighting?" I rolled my eyes and crossed my arms over my chest.

"You know the both of you are in the wrong..." I pouted at his response. A few moments passed before he sighed and threw up his arms in surrender.

"Come on, let's go to the boxing ring!" I smiled and jumped up on the bed. Zack recently joined the local boxing ring. Apparently, as a man, he wants to beat thing up so he can burn his extra testosterone. His words, not mine. Zack got up slowly, clearly still hurting from his session the day before and pulled me into his arms.

"I miss you today." His voice broke a little in my ear as his arms tightened around my body. I hugged him back with a smile and ruffled his hair before he finally put me down. He huffed angrily and fussed over his hair in the mirror.

"You know I hate it when you do that!" I rolled my eyes and rubbed my nose.

"Easy on the cologne big boy. It burns my nose." It was Zack's turn to roll his eyes.

## *Chapter Twelve: A Horrible Day*

I picked the dirt from under my nails as I waited for his royal highness to finish in the locker room.

"Here you go!" I glanced up and smiled at the beautiful and delicious smoothie.

"Thanks, Jack!" Jack flashed me a smile before taking the chair next to me. I took one big sip of berry goodness before returning my attention to my nails.

"Zack still getting ready?" Jack asked after a few moments of silence. I nodded and Zack practically came out running from the locker room with a smile.

"I'm ready, man!" Jack chuckled before joining him in the boxing ring. With mild interest, I watched the two circle each other in the ring before starting their fight when the bell ringed. The two eyed each other like trained practice, carefully accessing their opponent. Zack was the first to move. His movements so fast that I could barely follow the action but Jack easily sidestepped the blow before throwing a calculated punch right in Zack's ribs. He flinched, the blow catching his but surprise but without halting his movement he threw his own punch. This time Jack couldn't avoid the blow to his stomach. He jumped back gasping for air. Zack followed his attack with another ruthless punch. The game of throwing a punch and blocking another continued as the two danced in the ring for two hours. The fight ended at the sound of the bell, the two panted on opposite sides both sporting a hue of blue bruises on their skin. The two simply did the one-sided hug with a pat on the back before leaving the ring. They chatted happily as the two walked towards the locker rooms to clean up. I shook my head. Boys. I will never understand them. *Zack isn't a boy*, my consciousness sneered but with a wave, I ignored whatever deeper meaning followed those words.

I fought back a yawn as I watched the student filled the classroom. Sasha and her pack of mindless minions was one of the last to enter. They all seemed sullen as they whispered among each other. I frowned when Sasha finally glanced my way. Her face was red and puffy. She's been crying. I clenched my fist as her pain stricken face pulled at my heartstrings. Should I do something? She's my best friend. No, you guys thought, remember? The bell rung signaling the start of the class before I could act on any of my thoughts. My eyes followed her as she took her seat, her hand comfortably resting on her stomach. It seemed to be an unconscious action on her part as if a part of her is protecting her stomach. My eyes widened at the sudden realization. No. I must be wrong. She would tell me, right? Suddenly those spam of panic messages crossed my mind. He came inside of her back then. It's a possibility. At lunch, as I waited in line for my meal, my prediction became even more justified. One sniff of whatever meat they're serving in the cafeteria sent Sasha running for the closet bathroom. Whispers and rumors spread through the school and by the last period, I was dying to know if it was really true. As I neared Sasha and her gang of minions, my heart hammered in my throat. We haven't talked since our big fight and although I'm still ridiculously

angry at her, I still care for her. She was my closet friend for years. Heck, not even that long ago I was madly in love with her. Was it even love? It died out as a small flame licked by a strong wind. Before I could overthink the situation, Sasha saw my approached and a scowl crossed her features.

"What do you want?" Sasha sneered in anger. I stung I would admit but I squared my shoulders and reminded myself that she's still that same girl I loved so much deep down.

"Are you okay?" My sincere question caught her off guard. She frowned, shock clear on her features.

"Back off, you homo freak!" Minion one stepped before Sasha before she could respond and snarled. I bit my lip and clenched my fits. They're empty words, M. Don't even give them the satisfaction than allowing the words to hurt you. They're just empty words filled with lies. I glanced at Sasha, for what I couldn't be sure. Sympathy? Reassurance? The same girl I fell in love with? The girl that would've stood up and glared at the mindless minion and told her actually where she could shove her cheap hair extensions. I saw none of that. Just a hardened scowl, a face so corrupted with anger, that old friend was long gone.

"What the fuck do you want, Melissa?" Sasha spat my word and I glared. She knew I wasn't a big fan of my full name. No one calls me Melissa, not even my fathers.

"Why do you have to be such a bitch?" I spat before I stormed out of the classroom. Fuck her. I was just trying to be nice to her and she just threw it in my face. I don't even care anymore. She could be just another cliché and tick off a teenage mother off the list.

I met up with Zack at the usual place and after watching him spar with Jack for two hours, we took a long walk in the park nearby. Zack would flinch on occasion but stubbornly refused to sit back and relax. I threw myself down on the soft grass next to the lake and begrudgingly and very slowly, Zack lowered himself onto the ground. Birds chirped and ducks quaked as we just watched the scenery before us.

"Just ask already!" Zack broke the silence with an annoyed huff. I laughed and played with my fingers.

"Is Sasha pregnant?" By the deep sigh and angry clench of his fist was anything to go by, I would say that would be a yes.

"Oh wow. That's big." I gasped in shock and Zack simply nodded. Holy shit. Sasha really is pregnant.

"Well her life is complete to the shits now. Do you know what she is going to do?" Zack shrugged and tossed a rock over the lake waters. Alright so someone doesn't want to talk about his little sister being knocked up.

"Why don't you two just make up already? I'm not your fucking middleman?" I gaped in shock and before I could even comprehend Zack's sudden outburst, he was walking away from me. What the hell just happened?

"Hey, wait up!" Zack seemed to pause for two seconds before he spat up and disappeared around the corner. What the hell just happened?

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"I'm home!" I called as I stepped into the house. I frowned when I couldn't hear the normal commotion. Usually, Daddy Dearest was humming in the kitchen as he cooked dinner around this time and you could always hear Dad typing in his office. I heart hammered in my throat as every horror movie with a similar scenario played in my head.

"We're in the living room." Daddy Dearest finally broke the silence and I clasped heart, relieved. However, my momentary relief and happiness came to a crashing halt when I entered the living room and saw the somber expression on my fathers' faces. Next to them was a boy, only two years younger than me if I would guess, angry at the world. No one was happy and one quick glance at Daddy Dearest, I could tell he has been crying.

"What's going on?" My heart pounded in my throat, maybe a crazy ax murder would've been nicer right about now.

"Honey, why don't you sit down?" Dad asked with his most gentle voice. He too looked upset. I shook my head as fear glued my feet to the floor. Moments passed before Dad sighed and glanced at the boy who seemed to get angrier by the minute.

"There is no easy way to say this but..." Dad paused and swallowed with effort.

"You're dad over here has a bastard son." Daddy Dearest snapped before storming out of the room. I blinked. No. My mind reeled with the new information and I shook my head. No. I didn't hear him correctly. Dad dropped his head into his hands and sobbed. His body shook and his entire body language screamed shame. No. This can't be happening. I turned and ran to my bedroom. No. This can't be real life? I must be dreaming. I dropped onto my bed and screamed into my pillow. What a horrible day.

## *Chapter Thirteen: Family*

After a good scream and cry into my pillow, I turn to my side and called Zack. He picked up by the third ring with a slurred hello.

"Zack, I really need to talk to you. Please come over." I whisper cried into the phone.

"I will be right over." I could barely hear his voice over the noise in the background.

"Where are you even?" Zack hung up before I could get my answer but I shrugged. I will see him in a bit anyway. A soft knock pulled me out of my thoughts and Dad, the villain of the hour, poked his head through the crack of the door. I crossed my arms and shot him my best glare.

"Look, let me at least explain." I turned my head and chose to ignore him. I don't want to hear his excuses. Dad, however, ignored my body language and entered my room anyway.

"It was an accident. A mistake really. I was drunk one night and in a really bad space after your dad and I fought and-" I jumped up from my bed, my blood boiling with anger.

"After a fight with dad? You cheated on him?" I screamed, tears rolling down my cheeks. My heart broke into tiny little pieces at the thought of the pure betrayal and heartbreak my precious Daddy Dearest must be feeling.

"Get the fuck out of my room!" Dad scowled and instead took a step towards me.

"Hey now, that's no way to speak to your father." Oh, how I wished he would've left when I asked him too because my next words cut deep.

"You're not my father!" My heart shattered at the look on his face before I could utter an apology, Dad turned around and left the room. What did I do? Why did I have to say that? My body shook as uncontrollable tears rolled down my cheeks. Why did I say that? Zack found me a good twenty minutes later, sobbing on my bedroom floor. In my distress, he picked me up and laid me down on the bed. He climbed in next to me and held me close towards his body. He didn't say anything, he simply played with my hair and held me close. My body so exhausted by the turn of events of the day, I didn't think to ask why he smelled so strongly of alcohol at 6 pm.

Zack woke me up around dinner and we all sat around the table in a very tense silence. Dad sat at the head of the table as always with a grim expression on his face. Daddy Dearest ignored his usual seat and instead sat at the opposite end of the table. He wouldn't even glance at Dad. In his mind, Dad didn't even exist much less seated at the head of the table. Next to Dad sat his son who I have yet to learn the name off. I felt faint but as Zack tightened his hold on my hand underneath the table, I took one deep breath in before I finally broke the tension.

"So, what is your name?" The boy shot me a surprised look before answering.

"My name is Mason." I smiled and leaned over to shake his hand.

"My name is Melissa but everyone calls me M." Mason simply nodded before returning his attention to his dinner in front of me.

"Zack, my boy, how is your family?" Dad spoke up and the tension in the room returned full force and then some more. Zack laughed awkwardly before taking a sip of water.

"Well, Sasha just announced that she's pregnant so not so great?" I bit my lip to bite back my laughter but one look at Zack's face, a small chuckle escaped my lips. Zack shot me a glare which only fuelled my laughter even more.

"I mean it's pretty funny. You saw the exact moment your little niece or nephew was created." I snorted in between laughter which eventually infected the others at the table.

"It's not funny." Zack hissed and shot me his ugliest glare. I choke on my own spit as I laughed.

"I literally have no other information to this story and it's even funny to me," Mason mumbled which only fuelled the roaring laughter even more. I poked Zack's side and he shook his head before chuckling.

"You suck, M."

"Mason, why don't we take a walk and get to know each other?" I said which caught the boys by surprised. I shrugged in response.

"Well you're kind of family now and we should at least get know each other. Also, it will give the two dads some time to talk." Mason paused before nodding. I got up, gave Daddy Dearest a peck on his cheek before leaving the room with Zack and Mason trailing close behind me. I refused to glance at Dad's side on the way out. After grabbing out winter clothes, we opened the door and started to walk down the street.

"So, Mason. How old are you?" I broke the silence after a few moments passed. For over an hour we just talked about the basics before we headed back to the house. Zack waved us goodbye when he crossed his house and for the last few streets, silence filled the space between us. Mason was a troubled fifteen-year-old teenager, that much was clear. Apparently, he has been living with his grandparents for the last five years after his mom passed away from cancer. They were, however, getting too old to raise a teenage boy and reluctantly shared that his father was just one town over. A father that has been sending checks these last fifteen years. A father who clearly knew he existed but never bothered to meet. A father he met up two months ago who was reluctant to tell his family. A father who was sounding more and more like the biggest dick in the world. I couldn't stop myself as I hugged the boy only two years younger than myself who have suffered so much pain in his short life.

"From now on you have me." It was a promise that I never intended to break. We might not share blood but his family now. It came to absolutely no surprise that when we came home, Dad's car was gone and Daddy Dearest was crying in the living room with a bottle of Jack as comfort. I instructed Mason to get the ice

cream while I got the winter blankets from the closet. Quite naturally we all huddled up on the couch in front of the TV under the blanket. The rest of the night we didn't talk, we simply just watched mindless TV and ate ice cream.

## *Chapter Fourteen: Cotton Candy Hair*

"Why don't we go to the carnival? A good outing would do us wonders." I broke the silence at the breakfast table. Mason glanced up with a small little smile before returning his attention to the car magazine. Daddy Dearest hummed in response that only succeed to play on my broken heart. Ever since Dad left, Daddy Dearest just haven't been the same. Gone is the joyous laughter that would greet you when you arrive home. Gone is the live karaoke when he prepared the meal. Gone is the dancing in the living room. It as if his very soul left his body. I bit back the tears and wracked my brain. There has to be something that would make my precious Daddy Dearest excited to go out.

"You can dress me up?" This sparked his attention and with a small grin, I knew that I won. Daddy Dearest, no matter how depressed, would never miss out on a makeover. He has been dying to dress me up since he saw the photos of the New York trip.

"Are you going to invite your boyfriend?" Mason joked and I rolled my eyes. Mason is convinced that Zack and I are an item. Although we made it clear that we were simply friends, the boy didn't believe us. It also didn't help that Zack would make funny little comments that would fuel these thoughts. These last few weeks although quite grim, we managed to get in a few laughs. I clung to that. Although the moments were short and far in between, it was like a breath of fresh hair.

After Dad moved out, life just wasn't the same. Daddy Dearest was playing into the denial card in every move. He refused to accept that the only man he has ever loved cheated on him with a woman. How he could deny how much the betrayal cut his very soul and still accept Mason into our home is beyond me. Mason took residence of our old guestroom and to make him feel at home Daddy Dearest gave him full rein of redecorating the room. The two just clicked as they went on and on about this one football team and this new car about to be released on the market. I had no idea my adorable ex-drag queen of a father had this much boy talk in him.

"I will ask but he has been so busy with training." For weeks now, Zack has been training for this amateur boxing competition. He was obsessed with the sport and although I couldn't stand to watch his body turn black and blue, I tried to be supportive. I went to all the training sessions, prepared his meals and protein shakes. I even went as far as to learn the basics of giving a sports massage from the other girls at the club. I tried to be supportive but that doesn't mean I always approve of the violence that goes into it. If done right, it can be a great sport to support but the way Zack seemed to go at it...Something was different with him. Although he was still his goofy self with a smile on his face, something was different. It was this nagging feeling in the back of my mind and although I couldn't place what exactly was different, I knew there was something. If asked

if there was something bothering him, Zack would wave my concern away and distract me by changing the subjects. I must be overthinking things. Zack would tell me if there was something wrong, right? He knew that I was there for him, right? I rubbed my temples as I tried to finish my breakfast. These last few weeks were stressful, to say the least. Not only was there the tense home life and the suffocating anger that grew every time Dad tried to call, but there was also the exams just looming over my head with this ugly sneer. Graduation selflessly grew close. I was nowhere near close to deciding what I would be doing with myself, come next year than what I was months ago in New York. It feels like a different time, a different story almost. So much has changed in such a short amount of time. My love for Sasha vanished as we continued to ignore each other in school. The same girl I loved for so many years, now wandered the hall showing and glowing in teen pregnancy. According to Zack, she's having a boy and her lovely boyfriend, John, isn't stepping up to plate. He had his football scholarship to worry about. If this cut her deep, she didn't show.

"Let's go on Saturday. We can go shopping on Friday." Daddy Dearest pulled me from my thoughts and I blinked. I nodded in response and pushed my now cold pancake away.

"Maybe we can go out for dinner and a movie on Friday after the shopping," Mason suggested and Daddy Dearest clapped his hands in excitement.

"I've been dying to see the new Jurassic World! It actually premieres on Friday." Daddy Dearest exclaimed with joy. I pulled a face not that interested in watching a bunch of dinosaurs but as the chatted about the said dinosaurs, I reluctantly admitted defeat. Seeing Daddy Dearest smile with his old spark in his eyes, I could never snub out that flame.

"We should get the tickets soon. M, call Zack and ask him if he wants to join." Daddy Dearest ordered before opening his phone to watch the trailer. Mason eagerly joined as the two watched the dinosaurs run around on the tiny screen. I got up and left the room as I called Zack. He opened at the third ring, his voice husky with sleep.

"Good morning sleepyhead, do you have plans on Friday and Saturday?" Zack chuckled into the phone and threw me a line that made my heart beat a little faster.

"For you, never." I laughed and shook my head.

"Was that supposed to sound cool?" Zack laughed before mumbling a soft no. The movie as predicted was action-packed and incredibly boring. Although between the four of us, it seemed that only I shared this opinion. Not only did Daddy Dearest drag me against my will to the first film of the growing franchise, but he also quizzed me after the show. The men went on and on about the graphics and whatnot as I played with my meal. Most of the meal the three talked about what they would do in the situation of dinosaurs roaming the earth once more. It became a long discussion that I didn't even bother to follow. After dinner, Zack decided to go for a run before joining us for dessert on the couch. The next morning, Zack joined him at the club as he trained while Daddy Dearest started

the makeover process. I sat on the floor, my hands on the table as I tried to watch TV over Daddy Dearest shoulders. He got to work by applying a hair mask, face mask and then getting to work on my nails. My tender skins screamed in protest as he pushed and probed at my cuticles.

"What color do you want?" He asked after an eternity of time passed. Is my face supposed to tingle?

"Pink."

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I scratched at my arms as the glittery material irritated my skin. Daddy Dearest went above and beyond with the makeover. By the time he finished, I looked like I was my own attraction at the carnival. With a glittery and somehow fluffy dress, glitter stockings with shoes that glowed at every step, I walked around with cotton candy styled hair, with a lot of glitter of course, through the park. Zack full out broke out in laughter when he came home after the club and saw my attire. I looked so incredibly out of place as everyone else wore casual clothing. Kids would stop and point, adults would glance and shake their head and teenagers would snicker at my pain. Some even asked to take a picture with me which made the entire experience, much more entertaining to three men. I swallowed my complaints as I watched my father laugh the entire night away for the first time in weeks. If I knew that this would give him a pep in his steps, I would've offered myself on a silver platter days ago.

## *Chapter Fifteen: Panda Bear*

I bit my lip and hunkered down for another round. To say that I was captured in the evil hands of the slot machines would be a grave understatement. The first ten rounds were fun but as I got a little hint of victory here and there, the addiction quickly turned into an ugly monster. The prize wasn't anything luxuries but boy was I determined to walk away holding that damn bear and other small cheap games. I pushed the fact that with the amount wasted on purchasing three more rounds could've bought all the toys that were hoisted as the ultimate prize a good three times already. We all have our weaknesses, I defended myself. Zack and Mason weren't faring much better. They too fell into the trap of buying rounds after rounds if the game seemed to be too difficult. It also didn't help that the two was in some sort of competition for another. A competition that seemed to favor Zack. Zack, however, didn't rub his victories in the younger's boy face, he would instead that the time to teach the boy how to improve in his tactics. Where to aim the ball in the ball toss. How by placing his one foot forward, he could improve his aim. A feeling I couldn't even begin to described warmed my heart as I watched Zack with Mason. I surrendered my fate to the slot machines and turned my attention towards the two boys. After three rounds on the strongest man-machine, Zack being the victor in every single round, Zack was guiding Mason through the steps all the while sharing advice on how to build muscle. Daddy Dearest seemed to just enjoy watching the scenes unfold, well that was until the boys turned their attention towards the shooting game. That old little spark glittered in his eyes as he surprised Zack with his incredible aim. It took Zack only two seconds to remember that although my Daddy Dearest loved to bake and there was a time he was spending his time in drag, he was no pushover when it came to a gun. A stick military upbringing enforced this into him. Although it could only bring some negative memories to the surface, Daddy Dearest truly enjoyed shooting at the moving ducks. Zack enjoyed the challenge that the older man dished out and the two launched into a competition on who can shoot down the most ducks. Mason and I could only watch as the two slowly drew in a crowd. Zack by one duck was deemed the victor and with his prize in hand, he bowed to the crowd. I laughed and captured the moment with his phone. Zack shot me a big old grin before handing over his well-deserved prize.

"For Milady." I curtsied before taking the extra large stuffed panda bear.

"Well thank you, my prince." Mason shook his head and muttered under his breath all the while Daddy Dearest cooed and captured the moment with his phone with fake tears in his eyes.

"I ship it." I frowned in confusion but with a sly little grin, Daddy Dearest steered us towards the next attraction of the night. The ball pit for grownups. Sign me up.

Although I attempted quite desperately and pathetically might I add to forget about my upcoming exams, it selfishly announced itself by just dropping into my lap. The day arrived and with the first exam being the oh so dreaded Math test, I could only hope for the best. The exam period seemed to pass by with a blur all the while allowing our family to fall into a habit. Mason was adjusting to school life quite wonderfully. He made friends and started to train at Zack's boxing club. He too had his exams to worry about but I quickly learned that although the boy would barely touch his books, he had nothing to worry about. Apparently, he was one of those lucky souls that just had a great memory. If he paid attention in class he never needs to worry about revising anything. A talent that by every passing day, I grew more jealous of. I vowed to make him regret this and I did so by forcing him to watch Gilmore Girls with me. Although the sweet drama was loved by myself and my precious Daddy Dearest, Mason loathed every minute of it. Zack was deep in the midst of training for the boxing competition. He trained for hours every single day and followed a very strict meal plan. The boy was growing muscles and leaning out like never before. So much so that a crowd of fangirls would ooh and aww at his training sessions with Jack. It also helped absolutely no one that Jack was attractive in his own right. I didn't see the big deal of two grown man throwing punches at each other and would spend the time trying to jam whatever subject that was next on the list into my head. At every passing day my skills in the art of sport massaged improved and although this only brought a lot of ugly glares, snippy little comments from the fans, I just loved to rub it into their faces. They might be able to look at Zack but I could touch him all over. Although that came up so many times I never questioned the meaning of it. Sasha was just glowing and growing by every passing week. Now sporting a baby bump, she roamed the halls catching whispers and stares from some students here and there. It was still unclear what she would do once the baby arrives as Zack loathed talking about his younger sister being knocked up. I managed to gather from the rumors that Sasha planned to raise the baby on her own with the help of her parents of course while John goes off to college to follow his dream in football. Where this dream would lead is beyond me. John seemed more interested in the cheerleader than the game itself.

Daddy Dearest is the one that changed the most. Although the carnival seemed to be a moment of relief, he quickly fell into the shell of his being. He spends his days in front of the TV, allowing the depression to swallow his every soul until I came home one day and saw him still wearing the same clothes he wore days ago and balling his eyes out at Marley and Me. I snapped and pulled the blankets off and threw a bucket of water over his head. I told him what he has told me many times over the years.

"Buckle up, it's time to be a big girl." Slowly he started returning to his old habits. He started to cook and bake again and as he rediscovered the joy in playing around with new recipes, I saw bits of my old father coming to light. He still had

some moments where he would stare at Dad's old office with a sad glint in his eyes, but he would shake himself up and return his attention to the matter of hand. He took my advice to heart and he simply buckled down and got what needed to be done, done. He started to sing while he cooked but he didn't dance anymore. His dancing partner was now living in a small apartment a few miles away. Will he ever have it inside his heart to forgive Dad for his betrayal? Although Mason was slowing allowing Dad back into his life, I still refused to answer his calls. So fiercely protective of my Daddy Dearest, I couldn't allow the man who hurt him so deeply back into my life. Not until he could find it in himself to do so. The chaos seemed to surround our family but we were slowly just getting through it. before I could blink, the exams passed us by. With a short break from school, I could give my full undivided attention to Zack as the big competition loomed over our heads, only a few days away. I whistled at myself as I locked up my bicycle and walked to the front door. My heart sunk into my stomach as I found Dad on the living room chair with a grim expression on his face. Déjà vu neared knocked me off my feet as I remember the fateful day of Mason's arrival only a few months ago. Daddy Dearest had his oh so familiar broken expression on his face and one quick glance at Mason's face, I came up with nothing. The young boy was at stone-faced as could be. I slowly lowered myself on the sofa couch next to Daddy Dearest and steeled my heart for what could only be bad news. My heart seemed to hammer in my throat as I studied my one father. Dad really let himself go. With messy shoulder length hair, a beard in desperate need of a groom and a stained shirt, Dad looked absolutely miserable. Good, I thought. The clock dinged in the background as once again a tense silence filled the room.

"Well, there is no easy way to say this so I'm just going to get it over with. We're getting a divorce." Daddy Dearest words seemed to echo in the living room that once held so much laughter as the two who now could barely look each other in the eyes used to dance off beat to whatever song the radio played. My heart clenched at the old memory and I bit back the tears. I don't want this. I just want my old family back. Daddy Dearest continued but his words became muffled to my ears and I could only barely hold back the tears.

"I might be far from forgiving your father M, but I want you to at least talk your Dad." I shook my head as uncontrollable sobs shook my body. Without another word, I grabbed my bag and sprinted out of the house. Not wanting to spend a single second close to our broken family, I ran past my locked bicycle and made a beeline for the club. Zack will be there. He's always there.

## *Chapter Sixteen: Midnight Dreams*

I stumbled into the club out of breath and panting very unattractively. Running has never been my strong suit. Once I caught my breath, I found Zack relatively quickly. He was spotting Jack as he bench pressed the weights. I quickly made my way and once Zack spotted me he signaled one of the other guys to take his place. Once he was sure Jack had someone sporting him he ran to my side. The second he wrapped his arms around me and pulled me in for a comforting hug, ugly sobs erupted from my body. Zack didn't seem to mind as he only steered me towards the corner of the room for privacy and held me as I cried. He didn't even bat an eyelid when I finally pulled away from his chest and a trail of snort connected our bodies. He simply cleaned my face with his shirt and smiled softly.

"I'm here now. Tell me what happened?" And so in between snotty tears, I told him everything. I cried until I couldn't physically cry anymore before pulling away with a snotty little laugh.

"I'm sorry about your shirt." Zack frowned a little confused at my statement before following my glance. He pulled a face and quickly pulled his now quite embarrassing soaked with snot and tears shirt over his head. I wiggled my eyebrows at his naked chest which he simply ignored with a shake of his head.

"No worries. I get all the girls wet for me." I blinked before his joke finally broke through my hazed brain. I laughed and punched his shoulder.

"I will always be here for you, I promise," Zack said in a sudden serious voice once the laughter died down. I frowned before nodding.

"I know. You're not going anywhere, right?"

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"Knock them out!" I cheered and hugged Zack and he punched the air. The big moment has finally arrived. The boxing competition was a small one, only between a few handfuls of clubs and in total there would be twenty fights in total. Five per night. Four fighters per night. It was easy enough. Two fighters, chosen by a draw from a hat will fight against each other. The winners of the fight will then fight against each other and then Ta-da! The process will repeat and on the fifth day of the competition the four fighters that one the previous days will face each other off until we finally have the lucky two. Those two will then compete for the big win. They were keeping it short with six rounds on the first few fights but the finals would be the normal twelve rounds. My mind reeled as I tried to map out the entire competition rules again but although I've been watching Zack train for months now, I still don't know much about the sport or the point system or any of that. What if the opponent knocks you out in the second round? Does the match early even though there are four rounds left? I should Google all of this, I note to myself as I watched Zack warm up.

"I will see you afterward! I believe in you!" Zack smiled and I left the room ignoring my racing heart. I quickly opened the browser app on my phone to do a quick Google search on boxing. The last thing I want is to just sit there and have no idea if Zack won or anything. Or if there are any fouls. Are there even fouls in boxing? Mason called my name and gestured to my seat right at the front before I could search my unanswered questions. I guess I will figure it out as I go. Zack was overpowering in the ring. He could take a punch and wait his time but boy could he give a good punch back. He even knocked a guy out. It was insane, violent but the pure rush of adrenaline that flooded through the room was exhilarating. Zack was destroying his competition and I could see him walk away as the overall victor but then some guy called the Eagle stepped up and the crowd went nuts. Zack put up one hell of a fight but Eagle was vicious. He landed some ugly punches and I swear I saw a tooth get knocked loose. He was destroying Zack to put it nicely. The man could barely keep up by the end much less stand. Zack did get in a few punches, I will give him that but in the end, it came down to experience. Eagle has been in the game for years and Zack the newbie could only go that far. With one ugly punch to the temple, Zack toppled to the ground in a grunt of pain. My heart dropped into my stomach as I watched the event unfold. My breath got stuck in my throat and it took all my strength to not cry in despair. The paramedics carried off the ring and I quickly ran to their side in a blind panic. Zack was coming to it and seemed to be fine but with one quick check, they could tell the man suffered from a concussion and needed to be taken to the hospital. This news finally broke my pathetic control over my emotions and I full on ugly sobbed in the back of the ambulance as they took the man I cherished so dearly to the ER. There the doctor only repeated what the paramedics said, the man had a concussion, a light one. I needed to keep an eye on him throughout the night and he needs to take it easy for a while but otherwise, it doesn't look like anything serious. Zack simply joked while I refused to surrender and laugh. Swelling on the brain is fucking serious.

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I collapsed on my bed, mentally and physically exhausted at the night's events. Zack followed and slowly lowered himself on my bed. I quickly got up and removed his shoes before tucking him into bed.

"Well, you need to stay awake for a few more hours. What are we going to do?" Zack wiggled his eyebrows at my comment and I barely stopped myself from slapping the man. This only seemed to amuse the man further.

"I have some ideas. They start with a six and end with a nine." I rolled my eyes and shook my head. Only he could get me to do both. I probably looked like something from some demotic horror movie.

"I actually have been meaning to tell you something..." I trailed off. The sudden serious note in my voice perked his attention.

"So, I've been looking into taking a possible gap year after a graduate next month and I found something promising." I paused for dramatic effect.

"Spill it already! The suspense is killing me!" I chuckled and poked his chest. It was his turn to roll his eyes and I predicted if the action wouldn't cause him an immense eye, he would've have shaken his head at my antics.

"I found this company that takes you all over the world. They organize everything. Transport, accommodation, everything you can think off. You work at a place for a month before going onto the next place. It's like an intern at all these places. You're basically the helping hand. The jobs don't pay much and the entire thing is quite expensive but you're mainly doing it for the security in the foreign country. You can go out with your colleges and just experience a different culture. I guess you pay for the experience. You can join for a year or two years. What do you think?" I panted, out of breath after my little speech.

"I think it sounds perfect. Tell me everything." Zack smiled and my heart clenched without permission once more but pushing the growing feelings aside, I launched into everything. We talked about my future till the early hours of the morning and it was pure perfection. I slowly started to drift off to sleep around 8 am when Mason promised to be on Zack duty and a clear memory popped into my head just as my mind lulled to a deep sleep. It was Zack's fight with Eagle. The concussion punch played in my head in slow motion and I could see that Zack registered the punch coming and instead of blocking the punch like he normally would, he left himself wide open. He allowed himself to get punched. Why would he do that? Did he want to get hit? No, it can't be. Who would want to get hurt on purpose?

## *Chapter Seventeen: Puppy Love*

I skipped downstairs with a prep in my step and launched myself on my prey. Daddy Dearest squealed in surprise and spilled his tea. Luckily the man likes to drink cold tea so we could walk away without any ugly burns on our bodies.

"Guess what!" I giggled and jumped away from him to throw out my best moves. Daddy Dearest simply stared at me like I've gone insane for two seconds before he surrendered to my influence and joined in with the funky dance. Mason walked into the kitchen, processed the scene in front of him and turned around and left. This only made the funky dance without music so much better.

"I finally know what I want to do next year!" I huffed out of breath. I pulled myself on top of the counter while Daddy Dearest finally got to work cleaning up the spilled tea.

"Tell me everything!" Daddy Dearest squealed dramatically before jumping up on the counter to join me. I launched into the plans, going as far to map out the travel plans and everything.

"My precious baby is going to leave the nest!" Daddy Dearest sobbed, pulling me into a tight hug. I chuckled and rubbed his back in soothing circles.

"Maybe while I'm abroad I will finally figure out what I want to do for the rest of my life," I mumbled, biting my lips. It's completely normal to have no idea where you will be in like ten years, right? I have no big ideas for any possible career paths I might want to pursue. A year or maybe even two years while traveling the world should do the trick right?

"You're still so young M. You don't have to have your life all figured out in high school." Daddy Dearest said as he pulled me in for a hug.

"I know but everyone else does and I'm just here like oh uhm I don't really have anything I'm good at so yeah?" I could feel my anxiety start to climb as every breath I took burned.

"Take a deep breath and listen to your father. When I was your age, I was straight as can be. I was that super cliché football guy you see in the movies. I was convinced that I would be some big shot football player and spend my nights in the clubs with my buddies. I thought I had life all figured out but boy was I completely wrong. When Jake died and I found out that I had a precious little niece waiting for me, my world shifted. Suddenly I was a father to a 3-month-old. Suddenly I had to reassess my life choices and just like that, I realized how empty I've been. How truly alone I was. How what I thought was my dream and reality wasn't something I truly desired. I was just playing the cliché football role in some movie. I didn't want that to be my life. I didn't want to play some role anymore. I wanted to be and you were the reason for that. I became the man I was truly meant to be when I met you." My heart clenched when his voice broke and just like that this pressure in my chest was released. Tears rolled down my cheeks as I clung to my father.

"I know that we don't talk about Jake enough but I want you to know that he truly did love you. You were his little angel and when he died he shared you with me." Daddy Dearest voice was unsteady, heavy with emotions as he talked about his brother.

"I know," I whispered in response and tightened my arms around my father. We clung to each other for comfort. My heart tightened at the thought of my biological father. He died in a motorcycle accident only three months after my biological mother died at childbirth. I was an orphan just like that but my uncle took me in and became my father and sometimes even my mother. He took me in as his own and there wasn't a day that went by that I felt alone in the world.

"I love you so much, my precious daddy." Daddy Dearest sobbed and showered my face with kisses. I giggled and pushed at his chest but he was relentless with his kisses. He paused and whispered;

"I love you so much, my little angel." I laughed and kissed him on his cheek.

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My heart swooned as I watched Daddy Dearest play with the dogs. Only a few hours ago, the man announced over breakfast that he needed company once I leave for my travels. Even though I brought up that Mason would still be home, he simply waved my comment aside. Apparently, there has to be a girl in the house. I shrugged like you needed to convince me with empty excuses why we should adopt a dog. It was something I always wanted and I knew Daddy Dearest missed having a dog in the house, something he had to give up when he married that betrayer. Honestly, he could've just slept outside if the dog hair spiked his allergies, see the worries in my eyes. In the back of my mind, I realize I can't hate the man forever, after all, he has been my father for the last sixteen years. He was the man who taught me how to ride my bicycle and helped me with my homework when I got stuck on a math problem. I knew all of this but at the same time, I'm going to be angry at him for a while. Nothing will change the fact that he betrayed our trust and nearly broke our family apart. In time I will have some type of relationship with him but for now, his calls will always go to the voicemail.

"I love this one! And this one! Can't I just take all of them home?" Daddy Dearest sobbed as he clung to a handful of dogs. They are frightened to bits with the sudden human in their personal space but also kind of happy to receive such loving attention.

"I don't know why you're asking me, if I can help it we will take of all these cuties home." I tickled the one dog's belly. The little ball of fluff immediately rolled onto their back when I sat down on the ground. One tickle on the belly was all she needed to steal my heart forever. Mason was in dog heaven with this massive pit-bull as the animal basically became putty in his hands. I laughed as the dog licked his face and Mason didn't seem to mind.

"Yeah, we're going home with at least three dogs." I laughed but all jokes aside, we were going to adopt at least three dogs. Our yard is more than large enough to support the sudden growth in the family.

"Alright, let's take these precious babies home!"

After finishing all the needed paperwork at the animal shelter with the promise that once they approved our house, they will bring our new family members home, we ventured out to the shops to buy everything we needed. A large amount of dog food, food bowls, treats, leashes, toys, bed and did I mention the toys? The shop assistant had to explain to Daddy Dearest that the dogs would simply be overwhelmed with so many toys and we need to only give them two toys to play with at once. It works better to swap the toys out this way they stay excited as they think it's a new toy every time. Naturally, we couldn't leave without getting a personalized collar for each of the dogs. Lady for my little ball of fluff, Diva for Daddy Dearest and Baby for Mason's new best friend. After arriving home we got to work to set everything up so we could show we were fully prepared to be great dog owners once the animal shelter's worked popped by. He arrived just after 3 pm with the dogs in the back. He did one quick look around the house, walked around in the yard to make sure the dogs would have a fenced and safe environment to play and gave us his seal of approval. Mason and Baby reunited with so many hugs and kisses you would think they were apart for years. Diva like her namesake waltzed into the house, sniffed everything before settling into her new bed like the queen of the house she truly is. Daddy Dearest swooned and showered her with kisses and quickly brushed her fur. My precious little Lady was shyer than the others but quickly settled into the house after a few belly rubs. How can I possibly leave her behind when I travel? Can't I take her with me?

## ***Chapter Eighteen: Old Friends***

I screamed and ran full sprint into Zack's awaiting arms. He caught me like he always did and spun me around in a little circle!

"I missed you so much" I squealed at kissed his cheek.

"Never leave me again!" I moaned and tightened my arms and legs around him. I clung to him like a monkey. Zack simply chuckled and walked towards my house. The three dogs went absolutely nuts at his arrival and Zack somehow managed to squat down to pet them all the while balancing me in his arms.

"Boy, you strong!" I whispered into his neck while leaning forward to pet Lady. Unfortunately, by leaning forward, I threw off his balance and we came tumbling down to the hard ground, face first on my side.

"Fuck me, that hurts!" I wailed while cradling my nose and pride. Zack leaped into action and quickly assessed the situation. I closed my eyes and I desperately fought against the pain.

"How bad is it?" I finally asked after a few moments of silence. Truthfully Zack didn't need to answer. I could feel the blood drip down my arms and the stinging pain was anything to go by...

"It's broken." Yeah, I figured. Nothing in the wide big earth could stop me from crying like a little bitch at this comment. My wailing attracted the attention of everybody in the house we only caused chaos in its wake. The dogs went nuts. Mason fainted at the sight of the blood and Daddy Dearest immediately broke out in tears. Zack, the only calm being in the house, quickly took action. He picked me up as gentle as he possibly could but the action only caused more blood to somehow gush out of my nose.

"Towel." The order somehow broke Daddy Dearest out of his blind panic and he quickly ran for a towel. He was back before I could blink although the action of blinking deemed to be painful to be carried out at the present.

"Lean forward and breathe through your mouth," Zack instructed as he slowly lowered me into the car seat. Once buckled in, he handed me the towel. I quickly held it over my nose.

"We need to take you to the hospital." Zack simply said before climbing in on the driver's side.

"I'm going to take her. Stay here with Mason and the dogs. Once things have calmed down, come to the hospital. Don't worry. I will take good care of her." Daddy Dearest could only nod before Zack backed out of the driveway and pushed the limits of the speed limit all the way to the hospital. Thereafter a good three-hour long wait, the doctor agreed with Zack's diagnosis after touching my nose and face to the point I could only cry from the pain.

"You're going to need surgery. The nurse will admit you and give you something for the pain. Once the surgeon is available, you will be prepped and taken in. It's going to be a long night so you should get comfortable. For now, I'm going to pack your nose with gauze and place a splint on it."

The doctor wasn't wrong. It was a long night. Daddy Dearest and Mason only arrived around dinner time to check up on me and Mason fought the urge to faint while Daddy Dearest bit back tears.

"I called your dad, he is in New York for work but he sends you his wishes." I simply nodded but then regretted the action seconds after doing so. My entire face ached.

"How do I look?" I asked, suddenly very curious about my appearance.

"Take my word for it, you don't want to see," Mason commented and a quick glance around the room confirmed that it was better if I didn't see my clearly battered appearance. Daddy Dearest and Mason left around 9 pm. I was dozing off at the sound of Zack's comforting voice as he read me a story. I broke my nose, sue me for wanting to feel like a child and listen to a story before bedtime. The surgeon only ended up getting to my surgery late in the afternoon the next day. I got wheeled out after three hours with a new nose. I then staid another night at the hospital before being discharged. Once home, I cuddled with Zack in the bed. For the next two weeks, Zack nursed me back to full health although the worst of the recovery was behind us after the first week. Once the splint came off and I accessed the damage I felt a lot better about the entire situation. Even though it was still very much swollen, my new nose looked the same as my old one. Thankfully no big difference. This fact seemed to relax Zack a little as he felt so incredibly guilty for the injury. Even though it was quite clear it was my own stupidity that caused the broken nose. It was an accident really. Something I told him every day but who was I kidding. I loved all the affection I was getting. At the three weeks mark I felt a lot better and quick stir crazy, also a tiny bit annoyed with the fusing Zack, demanded a family outing to the zoo. It was like a breath of fresh air and the penguins healed all wounds. I sat there watching the little thing waddle in their tuxedos for a good hour. I've always had a soft spot for penguins. Who doesn't really? They're adorable.

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I played with Lady as I watched Diva and Baby play together. The two were quite smitten with each other. It was quite a sight to see with Diva being a third of Baby's size. A dachshund and a pit-bull, friends for life. Lady, however, couldn't be bothered with anyone but me which made me feel incredibly special and also semi worried about my departure in six months. My phone beeped, indicating a new upcoming message just as we got to the good part in belly rubbing time. Lady jumped in surprise at the sound and quickly ran away to hide. My heart clenched at this action, my poor baby. I glanced at my phone and my heart stopped. <I need you. Please come over." At that moment, I forgot all about our petty fight and rushed over to her house. I forgot about the fact that we haven't spoken a word to each other in months. I forgot all about that and instead concentrated on the fact that my friend needed me. I forgot my anger and resentment and pulled

her into a tight hug and she sobbed uncontrollably. I clung onto her and rubbed soothing circles on her back. We stayed like that, right in the doorway till the point the street light turned on and someone walking their dog glanced at us like we were nuts. We stayed like that until Zack came home from the club and gestured us inside. It was only once seated on the couch under a nice thick blanket, did Sasha regain the ability to talk.

"I lost it. The baby died." The words cut her deep and broke the dam once more. New sobs wracked her exhausted body and mind. I could only hug her in support. What do you tell someone that just lost a child? Sasha fell asleep in my arms soon after that. Zack then carried her to bed before the two of us climbed in with her and hugged her throughout the night. My heart broke for her because even though this pregnancy was unplanned, she loved this child dearly. She has prepared for this child's birth. She even named him. Lucas. He died before he could even open his eyes and take his first breath.

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Lucas's funeral was a few days after that. Close friends and family held a little memorial for the young child as we all mourned for the lost life. Sasha was in pieces, even more so when John didn't even bother to show up. She could only stare at the little coffin with tears in her eyes. I held onto her, fighting back my own tears.

"Does anyone have a few words they would wish to say?" The priest asked. Sasha trembled into my arms, words forever stuck in her throat. Zack stepped forward and placed a rose on the coffin. The size of the rose compared to the tiny coffin, broke my fight. Soft sobs shook my body as I clung to the now sobbing Sasha. She sank to her knees, pulling me along her. I hugged her tightly, sheltering her from the ugly world. The world that took her son.

"Lucas, you weren't with us for very long, we never even got to hear your voice, but you will forever be in our hearts. May you rest in peace, my little angel. Love, your uncle."

## ***Chapter Nineteen: One Day To Go***

The next month leading up to graduation was interesting, to say the least. The school was about a thing of the past, we just had to finish up last minute things and then call it a day. The average day was mostly just watching Zack do his morning workout, take the dogs for a walk, make lunch for the family, work on the paperwork for my travels and then around 2 pm, I will go over to Sasha. She was still very much so a shell of a human being without any real drive. I knew I couldn't force her. She needed time to heal. I simply stayed by her side as we watched Gossip Girl. We wouldn't really talk much, simply just watch the drama unfold on the TV screen and on occasion snack on some sweets. We would do this till dinner time and I would bid my second family goodbye and head on home. After dinner, Zack would come over to watch a movie or play board games, whatever we feel like doing for the night. Zack would leave around 10 pm and I would then just get ready for bed and read till I fall asleep. It was a mundane routine but also very much so needed. Everyone felt a bit raw if I was going, to be honest. My nose quite literally felt raw, Mason was stressing about this girl in his class. The boy is smart but he can be quite clumsy, read incredibly awkward when it comes to socializing to humans that aren't his family. To say he has a crush on her would be a gross understatement. It also didn't help that the girl was the queen bee and very much so involved with one football player. It was a lost cause really. Mason had his first heartbreak just moments after experiencing his first love. It sure as hell stung. Daddy Dearest was so deeply involved in creating new recipes that he mostly spends the day in the kitchen. Although he refused to let it show, the divorce was hurting him. Once a day he would be on the phone with the lawyer to discuss who gets what in the divorce and all of that jazz. He would always hang up clearly upset and return his attention to baking. The strangest, I couldn't exactly call it baked good, came out of the kitchen. Flavors that really shouldn't belong together but we simply tasted the food, pushed the urge to puke down and gave him a small smile before making a run for it before whatever he was brewing came out of the oven. It was quite painstakingly clear that the baking only served as a distraction and he tried to unravel the bonds that sixteen years of marriage created. Zack, he was just acting strangely. I couldn't put my finger on it but he wasn't himself. His corny, almost dad jokes, were suddenly rare. He constantly looked exhausted with ugly blue bags under his eyes. He also seemed to be sporting more boxing-related injuries. His knuckles almost never-ending red and bruised. He also strangely kept loading on his cologne. He was overdoing it really, almost as if he was hiding something but that could be was beyond me. He would get calls and suddenly leave and the list of strange behaviors just goes on and on. When questioned, he would simply laugh, change the subject and make some excuse to leave in the next twenty minutes. He will talk to me when he is ready. I can't force him to talk to me.

"I still don't understand why you're making such a big deal about the dress. No one is even going to see it under the robe." I groaned as I watched Sasha hold another dress in front of her. She was absolutely obsessed to find the perfect graduation dress. Sasha rolled her eyes and examined a purple dress.

"Everyone will see it at dinner." She simply replied before taking the purple dress to try on. Minutes passed as she grunted in the fight to get the dress on.

"Nothing fits!" Sasha moaned and not even a second past before her sobbing met my ears. I rushed to her side and pulled her into a hug. She still had some baby bump left, her body still experiencing some of the pregnancy symptoms. I think it's what stung the most. The fact that even though she was no longer carrying her child, if you looked at her appearance you wouldn't be able to tell. The doctor said it will take a while for her body to adjust. It still stung.

"I forget sometimes that his gone, you know. I would catch myself in the mirror and it would come crashing down on me...and it's-" Sasha broke down in sobs. My heart broke for her but once again the right words were lost on me. What am I supposed to say? What can I say to make her feel better? 'He is in a better place now.' How can that help her? He was her world. I have no doubt in my mind that Sasha would've done everything in her power to be a great mother and always be that ray of sunshine for her son. How is he in a better place? The best place he could've been is with her. Knowing that nothing I will ever say will make the situation better, I did what I could. I comforted her and cleaned her face once she stopped crying.

"I liked the red one." Sasha just laughed as she pulled off the purple dress.

"Yeah, me too."

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"So, tomorrow is the big day. Are you excited M?" Sasha's mom asked as she removed the pan out of the oven.

"Yes, I guess. I'm mostly just excited for the holidays." Zack laughed and tickled my sides.

"Yeah, we've been talking about maybe going to New York for a week." I smiled, happy to have the normal Zack back.

"As long as you two don't come home with another couple tattoo." Sasha snickered which caused the table to irrupt with laughter. How matching chocolate chip cookies always seemed to get some chuckles. The fact that we got a couple tattoo seemed to humor those around us. Although I would admit the cookie on Zack's wrist did seem to stand out as it didn't quite match the man behind it. He got quite a bit girly jabs at the boxing club when they first saw the tattoo. Zack couldn't be bothered and showed off his tattoo with pride. Who cares if society would tell him to get something manly. A cookie is manly. Everyone loves cookies.

"Zack told me that you're going to travel next year?" My third dad, wait maybe my fourth dad, asked. I must be the only girl in this world that could consider herself to have four Dads'. There was my biological father, my two gay fathers and Sasha's father. What a handful. I chuckled at myself before launching into a full-blown speech about my travel plans.

"I'm flying straight to Italy from here. They have the introduction week at some villa and then they place us. I might stay in Italy or they might send me somewhere else in Europe." Sasha swooned, apparently, Italy is packed full of hunks.

"It truly sounds like a one in a lifetime experience. You must be so excited!" I could only smile, stupidly excited for the future.

"I just enjoyed New York and learned so much about myself. I figured a good trip around the world would be just perfect." Zack smiled, quite obviously proud of himself for the role he played in my decision to travel. I shook my head and poked his leg in response.

"Dork!" Zack grinned his shit-eating grin before poking my ribs.

"But, I'm your dork!" Sasha made a gagging sound at this which caused the family to break out in laughter. I forced a laugh as I tried to calm my racing heart. Relax M. He meant it in a friend type of way.

"Zack, why don't you walk M home?" I pulled on my winter coat and waved my second family goodbye.

"I will see you tomorrow!" Zack kissed his mom goodbye before pulling on his winter jacket. I unlocked my bicycle and Zack being the true gentleman he is, took my bicycle so I didn't have to push it all the way home. The cold wind nipped at my nose and I rubbed my hands together for some source of warmth. Zack turned early quite for some reason. I could practically feel him distance himself from me. Something was clearly bothering me but I didn't want to push it again. I didn't want him to leave yet.

"Why don't we go sit in the park for a bit? There is something I need to tell you." My heart stopped, shocked at his words before restarting with a bang. He can't hear it right? I bit my lip but nodded. My gut was telling me that it was going to be bad news. My heart, however, was just stupid excited that he was finally going to talk to me. In my moment on inner turmoil, we arrived at the park and seated ourselves on the freezing cold bench. Moments of silence passed and Zack seemed to struggle for words. Just as he opened his mouth to finally break the tension in the air, a hooded figure appeared from the darkness.

"Give me all of your money!" Zack sprung into action, calmly placing his body before mine and removing his wallet and phone.

"Take everything you need, man. Just don't hurt us." I frowned, surprised at his response. Zack probably had a good twenty pounds on this guy. He can take him. I glanced around his shoulder and froze in fear when my brain processed that the mugger was packing. Holy fuck. He has a knife! Zack, calm under the pressure of danger, handed his phone and wallet to the shaking guy. He was clearly not

used to holding people up at knifepoint. In a way, that made him more dangerous. That's what all the cop shows told me at least. I held my breath as I clung to Zack's back.

"Bitch, give me your ring." I sob broke through my chest and with shaking fingers I removed the only keepsake I had from my biological mother. Your life is more important than this ring. It's okay. Your life is more important than this ring. I continued to chant this to myself in my head and I clumsily dropped my ring in his awaiting hands. The mugger moved as if to run away but a rustle in the trees spooked him. He jerked and I could only watch in slow motion as he pushed the blade into Zack's stomach. I scream left my mouth as Zack fell to his knees. The mugger ran off and I could only very numbly take out my phone (luckily I had it tucked away in my bicycle bag) and call for help.

"Please be okay." I cried as I held onto Zack. Considering the man was stabbed and losing blood fast, he was quite relaxed about the ordeal.

"It's okay. Don't worry. A stab wound is nothing." The ambulance arrived, ten minutes later. The paramedics jumped into action and I could only numbly watch the scene unfold. Did this really happen? Did Zack just get stabbed? This shit is only supposed to happen in movies!

## *Chapter Twenty: The Day My Life Changed Forever*

The rest of the evening was a blur. The entire family came over in the panic and we all could only sit in the hospital waiting room, hoping that Zack was right. A stab wound wasn't a big deal. Zack rolled out of surgery around 3 am, out like a light. The doctor ensured that there was no big harm done and he simply needed to rest and heal. A big breath of relief swooped through my body and I practically fell into the chair. What a crazy night. Daddy Dearest carried me to the car and then to bed before tucking me in and kissing my forehead. I got lost in my dreams where I was running from the mugger and somehow drowning in blood at the same time. Daddy Dearest rushed to my side when I screamed myself awake and spend the rest of the early morning at my side. I couldn't sleep and instead stared at the photos on my ceiling until the alarm pulled us from the bed. I got ready, numb after last night but I knew I couldn't exactly skip out on graduation.

"After the ceremony, we just need to go to the police station to report the crime and then we can go see Zack. I'm sure he is going to sleep most of the time anyway." I could only nod as I followed him to the car with Mason in tow. For the entire drive, I could only watch the scenery blur through the window. We met up with Sasha and her family after we parked and she pulled me into a hug. It was my turn to sob in her arms and she comforted me. We pulled away when they announced that the ceremony was about to start.

"Let's freshen you up and get this over with." I nodded and she pulled me towards the line of students. Once we were in place she whipped out her on the go makeup bag and cleaned my face. Once my appearance was deemed acceptable, she pecked my cheek and left to go stand in her rightful place. I took a deep breath and counted till ten. I only need to get through this next ten seconds. Ten. Nine. Eight. Seven. Six. Five. Four. Three. Two. One. And then repeat.

The ceremony passed by in a blur. I wandered around, certificate in hand as I searched for Daddy Dearest. I paused when I finally found him in a deep discussion with Dad. He turned to see me and at that moment I forgot about my anger. I ran into his arms and cried. Dad hugged me close to his body and played with my hair.

"Daddy is here now." Daddy Dearest joined in on the hug and we simply just cried together right there in front of my school. Mason completely throwing his cool street-cred to the side, joined in on the action. Soon Sasha and her family joined and pretty soon we were just a bundle of humans crying on the lawn. We finally untangled ourselves after a few moments and could only laugh at the number of stares we received from onlookers.

"Come, why don't we go report the crime so we can go see Zack," Dad suggested and we all hummed in agreement. I took his hand and allowed him to lead us to the car. Let's just get this over with.

Reporting a crime was relatively straightforward. An officer took my statement, asked some questions and promised to follow up with Zack in the next two days for his statement. He did mention that there were quite a few cameras around the surrounding areas of the park and one of them should've caught the mugger fleeing. Even though catching the mugger wouldn't suddenly make Zack unstabbed, I took comfort in the fact that he would be off the streets. I finished there after an hour or so. The entire group hug family was in the waiting room and Sasha's mom informed us that Zack was discharged from the hospital and we should all go out for dinner. He was just going to rest up a bit at the house. I hesitated. Every part of me wanted to rush to his side but he might quite clear to his mother that he refused to destroy our graduation plans and to go on without him. Reluctantly, I respected his wishes and followed the family to the restaurant. It was packed with other students but the food was great. My side felt empty without Zack but I followed the conversation around the table. I will see him in a bit. Tomorrow we can spend the entire day together. I can heal him to health this time around. Dinner finished without any big problems and we separated with the promise that once I get changed I will come over to spend the night with Zack.

"Are you sure you guys aren't dating?" Mason questioned and I froze. He is probably the most important person in my life. He is the first person I want to call when something big happens in my life. My side feels empty when he isn't next to it. I love him but we're only friends. I mean we did kiss that one time in New York but we laughed about it afterward. There were those captions on his posts but then again we never really talked about it. They could've meant anything. We're just friends. I bit my lip and my mind reeled.

"Mason leave the girl alone. Things will fall into place naturally." Sasha juttled before pulling me into a goodbye hug. Mason could only blush and nod before making a run for our car. I laughed and after waving goodbye, following him.

"I will see you in a bit. Tell Zack that I will see him soon."

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How every part of my being wished that the night just ended at that moment. Unbeknown to my tragic future, I jumped in the shower for a quick rinse, got dressed and quickly packed an overnight bag. Just as I pulled on my winter coat, my phone rang. It was Sasha's home phone. Those next words destroyed my very soul. My heart broke into so many tiny pieces I was unsure I would ever feel whole again. Screams filled the room and it wasn't until Daddy Dearest pulled my shaking body into his arms, did I realize it was me. I was screaming but it wasn't screams filling up the empty and cold room. It was wailing sobs. It was the sound of the love of my life leaving this world forever. It was the sound of my life-altering. Daddy Dearest in panic picked up my phone and a sob broke out as I could hear Sasha's father repeat his words. His broken voice was barely audible over the crying of his wife and daughter in the background.

"It's Z-z-zack. We just found-d-d him. He's dea-a-a-a-a-d." I collapsed, clenching the empty space where my heart used to be. Why? Why did he have to die? I couldn't even tell him that I loved him. I couldn't even tell him that I wanted to spend the rest of my life with him. Why? Why did he kill himself?

**THE END**

## ***The Future Of My Coming Of Age Story: Chocolate Chip Cookies And Pink Nails***

I can't believe this story is over. When I started this story I was in a very strange time in my life. I just shared my news about my past and overall I was in a fragile state of mind more than half of the time. While feeling so open and raw, I learned so much about myself. I fought every single day and now, months later, I can say that it was worth it. Every bit of pain that I felt after telling the world I was abused was worth it. Because I was able to move on from that pain. Truly begin to heal. This story helped in ways I can't even begin to put in words. It's almost humorous, that as a writer, the words are lost upon me. I started this story because I wanted to write some happy go lucky, rainbow and sunshine story, but as time passed. The story just grew along with me. I realized something very important. Without suffering and pain, there isn't happiness and bliss. You need the other one as into scale the level of what you're feeling. Okay, that didn't make much sense. As I said, the right words when it comes to this story is lost on me. But it comes down to one thing. I wanted to do more. I wanted to write my story inside my story.

For years now I've tried to write my story, my past but I always got so stuck. It was too much. Just after I started this story I stumbled onto a quote and it has stuck with me. "It's so important to turn your sadness into art. Use every ounce of your pain, don't let it go to waste." by Gabbie Hanna. Quite naturally, this story morphed into my outlet. My own way to write about my experiences with certain things without well writing my biography. Some of the themes in this story are inspired by events in my life. It still has its own life don't get me wrong but a bit of my soul is in this story.

It would be irresponsible of me to not talk about Zack's suicide in the last chapter. I take suicide very seriously. When I was fifteen, I wanted to commit suicide. I can remember the day I decided to vividly. I don't think I will ever forget that moment. What I felt. What was going through my head at that moment...I was in English class. It was the middle of the day and it was just another day. Nothing big happened the night before nor was there any big stressor recently. We were reading Shakespeare and I was dozing off. I don't know where the thought came from but suddenly the thought of going home, drinking his sleeping pills and just letting go popped into my head. It was an overwhelming burst of energy and the sense of relief I felt...looking back now I'm sad. I mourn for that young girl who thought the only way she was going to survive her pain was by ending it all. The rest of the school day I was happy. I was just so happy because I knew when I got home it was all going to be over. I wouldn't have to fake a smile and hope that things don't get worse. I got home and went through my normal routine. I made instant noodles and ate it while watching my usual show. I then went upstairs,

took off my school clothes and unpacked my school bag. I was just going through the motions really. I climbed on my bed and just stared at the ceiling. I wasn't really thinking about anything at that moment. I was at peace. My phone beeped and it was a message from my dad. It was just another one of those jokes or things that he still sends through. At that moment I kind of snapped out of the haze. I took me years to place those feelings that I felt in that moment into words. It was anger. I don't know who I was angry at but the will to fight boiled my blood and I refused to ever allow myself to think that killing myself would make everything better. I refused to give in. I saw that the act of my suicide would allow the man who abused me to win and I couldn't allow that. Over my dead body will I allow this man to win. Things didn't magically get better after that moment. It got worst. So much worst. The thought occurred to me on my weaker moments but I continued to fight. I fought because I knew eventually things will get better. Eventually, I will find a life worth living for. A life that made all that pain worth it. I've always wanted to talk about suicide, it should be talked about more. With this story, I was finally able to do. Zack's suicide is only the beginning though. It's only the end of this story but I planned from the start to have this a three book series. Yes! You heard that right. A **THREE** book series!

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Chocolate Chip Cookies And Pink Nails is only the **FIRST DRAFT** of book one. It is short even for short story standards. I'm so very excited to announce that my goal for this new year is to revise, edit and complete the final version for this story with the means to publish it. It won't be a big publish deal with some big company and suddenly this book is in all the bookstores in the world. Although that is **THE** dream. It will be an e-book on my website that true fans of this book can purchase. I'm planning to add at least another 80 pages to this story, which is basically double the amount that you see now. I realize there is a lot of events that I just skipped over. There is so much character development needed and well little plot holes that need to be filled. I have a list of things I want to add (nothing big will change) and I wanted to take this moment and ask you, the reader, to please comment down below and let me know what you think is missing. What do you want to see more off? What do you want to know? Do you want to hear more about M as she was growing up? How Daddy Dearest turned gay? There are quite a bit of things I want to go into detail about that I only briefly mentioned throughout the story. Zack's depression and struggle with alcoholism were very subtle throughout the entire story. It was important to me to not make it too obvious as M (and you the readers) should be completely overthrown by his suicide. There is so much more I can say but I will leave that for the second book.

Thank you so much for all the love and support. I truly hope you enjoyed this little part of my soul. And I hope if anything, you can take my message to heart. Mental health is so fucking important. If you're struggling, please reach out. If

not with family members or friends, then with a therapist. There are so many free online support communities. You're not alone. I know you feel alone and you're drowning in the pain, but please. Reach out. I know it's hard but it's worth it.

Love,  
Cassy